



01. THE CANNIBAL HERO

ONLY I KNOW THE GHOUL SAVED THE WORLD

MYOJIN **KATOU**

ILLUSTRATION BY

KASU KOMESHIRO





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ONLY I KNOW [01. THE CANNIBAL HERO]

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An anime-style illustration of two characters. On the left is a young woman with long, vibrant red hair and green eyes, wearing a purple sleeveless top and a black strap across her chest. On the right is a young man with short black hair and red eyes, wearing a dark, high-collared jacket with a red stripe on the shoulder. He is looking towards the woman. The background is a soft, hazy blue and white. The text is overlaid on the image in various colors and fonts.

“What does
a rotting ghoul
want with
someone
missing three
nights’ sleep?”

Emilia

A blacksmith whom Leon relies on for prosthetics and armor. She is one of the few people who knows Leon’s secret.

“I’m no
hero. Just
a monster
who eats
monsters.”

Leon Crossheart

The Third Hero of Salvation. Has the body of a ghoul but nonetheless retains his human mind. Nicknamed “Leon the Devourer.”



Alice Campbell

A novice adventurer whom Leon saved from death and disgrace at the hands of ferocious fiends. She wishes to become his apprentice.

“Master’s the only one of us with the power to save the world!”

Rheinhardt Crossline

A pretty, young boy who was Claire’s first disciple and was expected to succeed her. Also known as “Shining Rheinhardt.”

“C’mom! Give us a big ole smile!”

“Hee-hee. Now, that’s a nice smile, Leon.”

Claire Redheart

The Second Hero of Salvation. She has two highly skilled disciples named Leon and Rheinhardt.

“Cut it out, moron.”



“M-Master...
mumble
mumble.”

[THE GIRL'S **RESPIRE**]

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NEW YORK

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[01]

MYOJIN KATOU

TRANSLATION BY **JAKE HUMPHREY** | **C**OVER ART BY **KASU KOMESHIRO**

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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Afterword

The Dungeon of Mist and a Wandering Corpse

My body shakes with fear.

My teeth rattle in despair.

The flame of courage grows dim.

Yet I force my weary body on.

No matter how unsightly that may look.

For there is nothing else I can do.

Even the cloudless sky seemed tinged with gray.

The world was in ruin. A mere century had passed since the long and bloody crusade that ushered in a new age of peace, yet the world was plunged into darkness once more by a blinding white shroud of mist. The Shroud of Chaos.

It appeared suddenly and without warning in the hundredth year of the New Astral Calendar. The people detested it, holy men lamented it, and wise men feared it. But the fools—they regarded it with covetous eyes.

And a party of such fools, called “adventurers,” was at this very moment crossing the plains in a horse-drawn carriage.

“Whoa, really?!” exclaimed one, a spiky-haired brunet called Rascal.

“I could tell you were special,” added the young man in a suit of armor sitting beside him. “But to think we had a graduate of the Academy in our midst...”

The object of their wonder was a young girl with blue hair by the name of Renea sitting across from them. She puffed out her well-developed chest and replied, “Ahem! You’ll look back on this as one of the luckiest days of your life!”

Rascal and Tolkin, the man next to him, showered the young lady with more praise before looking with relieved expressions toward the girl sitting by the window. She had long white hair and was shaking in her boots.

“Miss Alice,” said Tolkin. “There’s no need to be afraid. This woman is a formidable ally.”

“Y-y-y-y-yes, you’re right.”

The girl, Alice, kept trembling, so Rascal and Tolkin simply shrugged. However, another boy, Cecil, reached out to her with a gentle smile on his face.

“It’s okay to be scared,” he said. “It’s an important instinct to have as an adventurer, especially fresh faces like us.”

Alice was about to express her gratitude, but just as she opened her mouth to speak, the coachman called out over his shoulder, “We’re almost at the fog. Time to mask up, rookies.”

The idle chatter immediately stopped. All adventurers knew to wear their masks when exploring the Shroud. The masks were steeped in the juices of the Orage fruit and dried, which was believed to protect against harmful effects, in particular the fearsome disease Blue-Eye, responsible for the terrifying monsters called “fiends” that prowled the lands.

Everybody checked their weapons as the carriage came to a halt.

“Stay safe out there, rookies,” said the coachman, watching his passengers disembark before turning around and heading back to safety.

There was a short pause where nobody moved a muscle. They all knew that beyond this point, there was every chance they wouldn’t return alive. Alice, the most terrified of them all, had even begun muttering a prayer underneath her breath, and it was not obvious whether the girl herself had realized it.

“O, St. Augus...p-please keep us as we walk through the valley of shadows...”

To her comrades, the trembling girl was a reflection of their own mental states. “Hey, don’t be gettin’ all flaky on us!” said Rascal, apparently the most perturbed by this window into his own fear. “Don’t forget you’ve got us here!”

“He’s right,” said Tolkin. “None of us face our trials alone. We stand strong

together.”

Alice felt heartened by these words...and ashamed of her own cowardice. If she was ever to fulfill her dreams and stand by *his* side, she would need the courage to see it through.

Alice tried to remain hopeful, and, at last, she spoke.

“I...I shan’t be a burden! I promise!”

Her partners looked back at her with proud smiles.

“Right. Then let’s take our first steps down a path of legend.”

The party of five exchanged fortifying glances and stepped into the mist.

Once inside the dungeon, they kept to the main path. Rascal, Tolkin, and Alice all broke into a cold sweat, feeling the evil lurking just out of sight. Just then, something crawled around the corner.

“A slime. Perfect for our first real fight.”

It was a lump of flesh the color of sludge, with smooth, flowing skin and a human face. As it crept along the ground with slow, painstaking movements, the face moaned, “I’m late... I’m late...”

“Alice, Rascal, Tolkin, watch closely! I’ll show you how a true genius fights!”

Renea stepped forward, extending her palm.

“O, fire and lightning, come to me! Lay waste to my foes and bring eternal stillness!”

Renea’s clear, sharp words heralded a burst of purple lightning from her palm that hit the slime head-on.

“I’m...late...”

With one final cry, the slime melted into an unrecognizable puddle of rotten flesh. Left behind in the center of the remains was a single jewel. Renea dashed over and scooped it up.

“...Damn. Nothing special. Guess he was just a normal dude before he got all, you know, gooey.”

A Testament Stone. This was the object left behind after a fiend earned a temporary reprieve from life. It was also an adventurer's main source of income.

"...Well, color me surprised," said Rascal, stunned by the impressive display of magic. "I didn't know you could use Sacraments."

"We can manipulate the Source ourselves," said Tolkin, "but not to that same extent..."

The Source was one of the mysteries revealed only to initiates of the Church of Cthul. It was an unfathomable power that dwelled within the body, granted to mankind by St. Augus in times of old. He was the first in history to communicate with the Undergod Cthul himself and unravel the Source's mysteries, becoming the founder of the Cthulian religion. Believers received this power as well, and by studying its secrets, they could grow adept in manipulation of the Source and call upon its boundless potency in battle.

The Sacrament was the name given to the most powerful of these arts, and students able to call upon them were rare.

"I'm also a Sacrament user, by the way," said the other man, Cecil. "I'm not as adept as Renea, though."

"Wow! You're saying we've got two Sacrament users on our team?!"

"We've got luck on our side!"

Rascal and Tolkin beamed with self-assurance, their stress of only a few moments prior all but gone.

"We're gonna make so much money today!"

"Maybe we can trade this starting equipment in for something better already?"

The fear had given way to a careless optimism. And that was when it happened.

"The first thing I'll do is invest in some better armor, and—"

Tolkin's words were cut short.

“Shgyugh.”

It all happened so fast that nobody realized what had become of him at first. And when they finally did, it nearly destroyed their feeble minds.

It was a rock, thrown with incredible force, which had taken off poor Tolkin’s head.

“Tol...kin...?”

Rascal stared in horror, dumbfounded. Then...

“M-m-meeeeat... Meeeeeat...”

“Ch...ch-ch-chil...dren...”

Through the veil of mist came the horrifying cause. Dozens of blue pinpricks in all directions. The eyes of fiends.

At that moment, everyone made the same decision.

“Run!”

It was Cecil who cried out first—a prelude to the carnage that was to follow.

Courage. Humanity’s greatest weapon and a last resort against the specter of fear. In a dungeon, it was the only thing on which an adventurer could truly rely. Knowledge and skill were both secondary; tools subservient to the whims of the heart. Cecil and Renea had both forgotten that simple truth and were scrambling around madly, searching for a way out. Their minds were muddled, unable to put any of their precious Sacraments into action.

Manipulation of the Source required a calm mind. Reciting the chant was merely one method to achieve this state; without a still heart, it was no more than soliloquy. Knowledge and skill were meant to be their two wings for soaring over troubles, but right now those wings were clipped, and their only destination was a gruesome end for both them and their comrades.

“We’re nearly at the exit!” yelled Alice, more terrified than anyone else. “Just

a little longer! Don't look back! Just keep on running as fast as you can!"

There was no response. The others didn't need to be told. None of them wanted to look back and face the cruel reality bearing down on them. Nobody wanted to accept the horrible truth...that those fiends were getting closer.

"Ch-ch-ch-children... Children..."

"M-meat...meat. Wanna eat...meat..."

Kobolds. Unfortunate souls warped beyond recognition by the influence of the Shroud. They pursued the adventuring band gleefully and with slavering mouths.

Perhaps it was their terrifying persistence that caused Renea to trip on a rock...and fall.

"Aaaagh!"

A shrill scream issued from her paling lips. Cecil and Alice both stopped and looked back.

"Renea!" they both cried. Rascal, meanwhile, lacked their virtuous intent and continued running.

"Hee...hee...hee...hee. What's...for...dinner...todaaay...?"

A kobold that had been hiding in a side passage pulled him to the ground. Rascal let out a tiny squeal that would prove to be his final word, and the air grew thick with the sounds of him being messily devoured, providing a haunting accompaniment to the girl's anguish.

"H-help me! Cecil!"

Renea held out her arm, gazing imploringly at the blond-haired lad. However, their hands never met. The kobolds advanced like a wave, surrounding the three rookie adventurers.

"You'll pay for this!"

Cecil swung his longsword, hoping to cut down a few of the deadly foes...but to no avail. Another of them took Alice and pinned her to the ground, leaving Renea without any hope of salvation.

“...Huh?”

It was then that Renea felt something hard pressing against her lower body. It was the kobold's erect genital.

“No... No... Nooooooooooooo!”

She struggled but was unable to fight back against the monstrous strength of the kobold. The beast took no heed and moved his claw down to Renea's hips, tearing away her dark blue breeches and snow-white underwear.

“Gagh!”

The kobold spared no thought to Renea's pain, the breaking of her mind, the tearing of her hymen. He mindlessly thrust, indulging his primal desires. His member ravaged her insides, hard as steel.

“Agh! Gagh! Ghh! Gah! Ggh! Agh!”

Renea emitted a series of tiny yelps, her eyes flayed wide in pain. Each thrust rocked her heaving breasts, which in turn aroused the kobold further, causing his thrusts to grow both in intensity and frequency.

Beside her, Alice looked on with pained sorrow, unable to do anything to help. The kobold atop her emitted a foul breath as his own girth began to swell.

“Ooh... Oohh... Oooohhhh.”

The kobold turned his claws to Alice's lower half and, in one swift movement, tore the cloth apart before pressing his raging phallus against Alice's exposed privates.

“H-help...”

Alice thought of her savior, begging him to appear. But as if mocking her ridiculous fantasies, the kobold prepared to violate her.

“Wa...want... Waaaaaaaant!”

Just then...

A single gunshot rang out.

The explosion rattled the eardrums of all creatures present. And then the beastly head of the kobold that was crouched atop Alice and poised to rape her disappeared. The rest of his body turned to rotten liquid and doused her.

More shots rang out. Five in total. And with each one, another of the beasts' heads burst like a ripe watermelon.

"It's him!" Alice cried.

A man in a dark coat walked through the mist, his left leg dragging a bit with each step, a sword at his hip and black hair with streaks of gray atop his head. In his left hand, he held a pistol at eye level.

"...Come, *my brethren*."

The kobolds all attacked at once. Claws, fangs, all pointed at the intruder's flesh.

But the man did not stop. His gunshots rang out ceaselessly, each reducing another fiend to a fetid puddle on the ground. However, the monsters did not relent either. Undisturbed by the deaths of the others in their pack, the final three charged the man simultaneously, their teeth and claws directed unerringly at his flesh.

The man...did not move. He stood still, unflinching in the face of danger, as if welcoming his own end. The beasts' claws pierced his heart and right lung. A fatal wound, to be certain. Yet even this did not end the creatures' relentless assault, and the third kobold, a little behind the other two, opened his jaws wide.

"M...m-m-more. Mooooore!"

The sharp teeth closed around the man's neck, ready to rip off his head. But the fatally injured man was not put off in the slightest.

He raised his right arm and blocked the beast's bite.

Then there was a shrill ring...and the kobold's teeth shattered.

"Wing, unfurl, and take my prize."

In response to the man's short chant, his right arm began to change. It grew rapidly, tearing apart the coat sleeve and revealing its true form.

The man's right arm was made of black steel.

In the blink of an eye, the prosthetic transformed from an everyday convenience to a brutal weapon. The rounded fingers became sharpened knives. Hooked blades swung out from inside, and the man turned his burning crimson eyes upon the beings whose claws were embedded in his torso.

"...Begone."

He swung his weighty steel arm, effortlessly reducing the fiends to a puddle of meat gravy, and a pile of softly glowing Testament Stones.

"H-he tore through that fiend so easily!" said Cecil with wonder. A fiend's skin was too tough to be severed by human hands, and even using Sacraments, it wasn't an easy job. But the enigmatic figure didn't stop to brag. He calmly picked up the Testament Stones and placed them in his pocket.

Then Cecil was struck with wonder for a second time.

"What? His wounds...!"

The man had sustained fatal injuries in the battle. Yet in the blink of an eye, they sealed themselves up as if by magic, and in a few moments not even a scar remained.

"...Must have heard the noise," the man muttered as a second pack of kobolds appeared, twice the size of what he had just dispatched.

"...It's over. We're all dead," lamented Cecil.

"No," replied Alice. "We shall be all right. He will protect us."

She had faith. This predicament was no predicament at all.

It wasn't long before her faith was rewarded.

"H-hun...gryyyyyy!"

"D-doc...doctor...tor...tor...!"

"Pain...p...p-p-paaaaain!"

The fiends all howled in chorus, and a massacre ensued. They vastly outnumbered the adventuring band...and yet...

The determination in the man's crimson eyes was unwavering.

"Let sorrow be my guide. Blade of Azakiel. The moon's tragedy. The white butterfly's wing."

Four clear verses fell from the man's lips. And just as the pack was about to reach him...

"...Arts of Steel, Deploy. Abominable Armament Number Three: The Murderer's Rushing Fang, *Slasher Bite*."

The man's mechanical arm transformed once again, this time into an enormous serpent of blades. Then, as if possessing a will of its own, it reared up, let out a howl, and swept its body horizontally. The monsters were sliced apart in the blink of an eye, becoming dirty puddles of rotten flesh. The mad band of beasts did not let up, however, and continued charging, like moths to a flame.

Each of them was liquefied before landing a single scratch on the man.

"...May your sleep be eternal salvation."

Amid a pool of rotten flesh and a hoard of sparkling stones, the man spoke in solemn, merciful tones, like a priest. As he did, he gestured, making a four-pointed shape in the air.

Cecil could only bring himself to say one thing...

"...What the hell?"

His mind was awash with emotion, but before he could put any of it to words...

The man looked up to the heavens...and stepped forward. Dragging his leg behind him, he walked over to one kobold who still clung to life. He—or maybe she—seemed to have been left alive on purpose. They flailed helplessly on the

ground, unable to right themselves, and as the man looked down at them, he slowly removed his mask. The iron plate covering his mouth came away to reveal a handsome yet deathly pale face. Around the right side of his mouth, the flesh had been stripped away.

He looked like a monster. No, he *was* one. A fiend with a human heart.

He lowered to his knees, opened his mouth...

...and sunk his teeth into the fallen beastfolk's shoulder.

"Eep?!"

When at last Renea returned to her senses, she squealed at the sight.

The man was a predator, feasting on his prey. After tearing chunks off the kobold's shoulder, he chewed, swallowed, and moved onto the fiend's chest, then legs, and finally the flanks of the torso. He stripped the flesh and gobbled the organs, making unsettling noises all the while.

"Urgh...!"

Renea couldn't cope with the sight and vomited all over the floor. Cecil looked on, horrified, as the sweat dripped down his brow, and the name of that monster-eating fiend came to his lips.

"It's...Leon the Devourer!"

Cecil and Renea both wore undeniable looks of disgust. Alice alone smiled pleasantly.

"I've finally found you," she said, and no sooner had her utterance faded into the mist than Leon finished his meal and picked up the Testament Stone before taking a look around—at the other stones, perhaps—and sighed.

Then he replaced his iron mask, once again concealing his inhuman face, and turned to the adventurers. "Take them or don't," he declared. "It makes no difference to me."

With that, he turned and, dragging his left leg behind him, disappeared into the white darkness.

"Th-that was him! The Third Hero of Salvation, Leon Crossheart!" spoke Cecil,

as if finally able to pronounce the words. His expression and his eyes were filled with fear and revulsion. “How can they call him a hero? He’s a monster!”

His teeth chattered. His whole body shook. Renea raised no objection to his claim. But Alice...

“No, he’s not,” she declared with conviction. There was no trace of the scared little girl anymore. Only a young woman delighted to find the object of her search at last. “He’s not a monster. He’s...”

Whatever she said next, she said only in her heart. She simply watched, silently, as the walking corpse disappeared into the mist.



The Solitary Ghost and the Girl with Nowhere to Turn

If I am not strong, I cannot protect the past.

If I am not strong, I cannot keep my promise.

That is why I slew my old, weak self.

With no memories beyond the last nine years, the Holy City of Yugosland was the only place Leon could call home. He walked alone through the streets in the dead of night, dressed in rags. The scars of battle had left his dark coat ragged and worn, and his hair was thick with clotted blood.

He trailed his useless left leg—a mechanical prosthetic—behind him. It made for a pathetic sight. However, none of the people he passed on the street held any pity whatsoever. One averted their eyes. Another looked on with barely concealed disgust. Two of them muttered to each other as he walked past, and another dumped a bucket of cold water on his head. A woman from a second-floor window. She spat on him and yelled, “Get out of here, freak!”

Soon, the corpse arrived at his lodgings, a vast mansion, and one of the few physical reminders of his past.

“I’m home,” he said as he entered, though there was nobody within to answer.

Still, behind Leon’s crimson eyes dwelled the image of the two who used to share this abode with him. He walked alongside those phantoms to a room on the upper floor. There, he collapsed on a bed.

“Almost four years now...”

Four years since the day he lost everything. Four years since his life became a living hell.

“...I don’t deserve forgiveness. But if there’s just a chance that I could make things right...”

Leon didn’t finish that thought. He closed his eyes and fled this cruel world.



The man had started with nothing. No memories. No purpose. No standing. No sanctuary. Without those things, he was afraid, and so he sought them.

It was only now he realized what a mistake that had been. There was nothing wrong with nothing. With nothing, he could leave this world behind and avoid having to feel the despair he felt now.

“If you wish to find what you seek, you must choose a path and follow it.”

It was in that hellish world that he—that I—discovered those two people.

“I will show you the way. How you walk it...is up to you.”

The Second Hero of Salvation, Claire Redheart.

Teacher. Mother. Purpose. She was everything to me.

But she wasn’t the only one.

“Don’t fret it. We’ll protect you.”

Rheinhardt Crossline. He was like a big brother. A small big brother, but he was still my family.

I wanted to spend my life with them. I wanted to pay them back for all they did for me.

But...

“It’s all...my fault.”

...on that day, I lost everything.

“Leon. Rheina. I...”

She went somewhere far away.

“Hey, partner. The next time we meet, let’s...”

And he went somewhere far away.

I screamed. I knew it was in vain, but I threw out my arms and screamed.

Wait. Don't go.

Don't...

"Don't leave me alone!"



The dream, like all things, came to an end.

"Don't leave me alone? ...Ridiculous. I did this to myself."

Then the corpse closed his mouth and turned his attention to what had awakened him. Leon's ears could hear a pin drop a mile away. An intruder on the lower floor posed no problem at all.

"...Fool. You should have contented yourself with the first-floor safe and left."

They were coming up the stairs. They were nearly at the door. Five paces. Four, three, two, one...

The door opened. But when Leon saw who it was, he looked puzzled.

"Ah! I...I thought you might be in here!"

It was a young woman with long white hair that came down to her hips. Smooth, unblemished skin and sparkling green eyes. A true beauty in every sense of the word. Certainly not the kind of person one might expect to be breaking into houses in the middle of the night.

"...I remember you," said Leon.

"Ah, um... Alice Campbell, at your service."

"...One of the people the kobolds attacked in Shuzeria Dungeon."

Alice's eyes were downcast.

"You really don't remember, then," she said.

From that, Leon deduced the two must have met some time before, but he couldn't recall when.

“I came because I...”

“I don’t care about your life story,” Leon replied. “Hurry up and get out of my house, and never show your face again.”

It was a harsh rebuke, and Alice seemed genuinely hurt by his words, but she worked up her courage and looked the corpse in the eyes.

“I came because I want to learn from you! And I’m not leaving until you agree!”

Her eyes were filled with the fire of wrath, like a misbehaving child defying her parents.

“Ask some other hero. They’ll be only too happy to help.”

“I...I want to learn from *you*! I don’t want to ask anybody else!”

The two argued for some time, but neither relented.

This girl’s not listening to me. We’re just arguing in circles. Still, I can’t just kick her out. I can’t use force against a young lady.

Yet the girl’s stubborn nature was proving hard to overcome.

The thought of taking on an apprentice was beyond the pale. Leon Crossheart lived alone and planned to die alone as well. That was the unspoken promise he had made to himself. There was only one thing to do.

...It’s a little mean, but I have no other choice.

Mired in doubt, guilt, and self-loathing, Leon opened his mouth to speak. To deceive the innocent young girl before him.

“In that case,” he said. “I’ll give you a trial. A trial to see if you are worthy of being my disciple. If you pass—”

“Then I can learn from you?!”

Leon nodded, and Alice’s angelic features blossomed into a smile, as though it were already a done deal. Leon knew, however, that her dream would never come true.

If I break her heart a little, I’m sure she’ll give up, just like all the others. There’s nobody on this earth who can stand beside me.

No matter what, the place at Leon's side had to remain empty. He was incapable of protecting anyone.

"You can sleep here tonight. Assuming you don't have an inn already, that is."

"Y-yes! I mean, no! I'd be glad to! The truth is...I have no money... Ehehe."

Thus, the desperate girl and the lonely ghoul began their short stay together.

Early the next morning.

"Wakey-wakey! Time to get up!"

A cacophony of clashing pots accompanied the girl's yells. It sent Leon's mind back to another time, to a morning long ago.

"Get up! It's morning!"

"This racket could wake the dead! Oh, wait—you are dead! Ahahahaha!"

It felt as if Leon were transported back to the days of his rowdy senior's merciless awakenings.

And that made it all the more irritating.

"...Be quiet," he snarled, causing Alice to jump and quiver.

"I-I-I-I'm sorry!" she yelped. "I-i-it's just...you weren't waking up, so..."

"Who cares? I don't remember asking for a wake-up call, do you?"

Leon sighed and righted himself. Alice smiled nervously and said, "I...I've made breakfast. I worked really hard, and I think you'll like it!"

Leon observed the girl's bloodshot eyes. She didn't appear to be lying. She must have risen quite early and been slaving over the stove all this time.

She wanted his approval. She wanted Leon to stop and look at her. He could see it in her eyes.

It would be a lie to say Leon wasn't happy about that, at least partially. But despite—or perhaps because of—those feelings, he had to disappoint her.

"I'm a ghoul. I don't eat human food."

His staunch refusal left no room for discussion.

“Your kindness is wasted on me,” he said. “Never cook for me again.”

This revelation came as some shock to the eager Alice, whose face slowly fell.

“...I’m sorry. I suppose I got a little ahead of myself, didn’t I?”

She left the room. Leon could see the tears forming in her eyes as she did. It pained him...but it was for her own good.

“It was the right choice,” he muttered beneath the crushing weight of guilt. “...I’m sure it was.”

The corpse heaved a deep and helpless sigh.

Later, after Alice had finished eating, Leon told her, “Grab your bags. We’re leaving.”

At the sound of his voice, Alice jumped out of her seat. “Whoaaa...,” she said, as though she’d just witnessed a miracle.

“...What’s that for?”

“W-well! You spoke to me! *You* spoke to *me*!” she said, as if expecting Leon to be angry. “I was worried...you know, after breakfast...”

Watching her express relief, Leon felt a twinge of pain. He knew the blame for that morning’s exchange fell squarely on his own shoulders... Yet when he looked into Alice’s eyes, he felt a strange sense of déjà vu. It felt like one more step would bring all his old memories flooding back. Then he would remember who this girl was, and if that happened, he wouldn’t be able to ignore her any longer.

Thus, Leon steered the conversation back on track.

“...Get ready. We’re leaving in ten minutes. If you’re not packed by then, I’m going without you.”

“Y-yes!”

Alice’s loyal demeanor was unshaken in spite of Leon’s unkind treatment. She trotted back to her borrowed room, put on her equipment, and hurried down

to the front door where Leon was waiting. The pair of them then left the mansion and headed into town.

“Um,” ventured Alice. “Are we going to a dungeon? What kind?”

“We’re not. We’re heading to the guild.”

“Oh, th-the guild?”

“Yes. Most people have this impression that adventurers just explore dungeons. Especially newbies like you.” Leon looked Alice in the eye and continued. “But an adventurer’s life isn’t restricted to the collection of Testament Stones and anomalies.”

The Shroud affected not just the area where the disaster first occurred. It had also spread to surrounding lands. One of an adventurer’s tasks was cleanup.

“Quests don’t bring in a lot of money,” Leon explained. “And nobody earns a hero’s title by fulfilling them. However, the risk of death is less than half that of dungeons. You can use them to gain experience until you’re ready to take on greater challenges. So today, your trial is to complete one.”

“S-so what you’re saying is...you’re worried about my personal safety...?!”

It was true, but Leon worried what might happen if he admitted it, so he ignored Alice’s question.

“But...this quest will most likely involve entering a dungeon, nonetheless, will it not?”

“...Perhaps.”

“Still, you chose a quest because you were mindful of my well-being! That’s so nice!”

This girl was beyond help. She would believe whatever she wanted, so long as it made her feel better. Leon was already fed up with her, but even so, he couldn’t help but be charmed by her excitable nature.

...That was why he found it so painful knowing how it was all going to end.

I only bring pain to those around me. Once she realizes this, she’ll leave. Just like all the others...

Leon remained silent, trying not to feel anything about their imminent farewell, and soon the pair arrived at their destination. Leon opened the gate and led Alice inside. The guild was packed with adventurers, just like any other day, and the energy within its walls was starkly different from the outside.

However, as soon as they noticed Leon, the place fell silent.

To Leon, this was an everyday occurrence. But Alice became scared and confused. She stopped in her tracks, her bright green eyes trembling.

“...Keep walking. Stay by me.”

Trailing his left leg behind him, Leon walked toward the notice board to which quest notes were pinned. However, on his way...

“Tch! Who do you think you’re lookin’ at?”

“Get outta here, freak!”

Leon’s fellow adventurers looked at him with anger and revulsion. But Leon didn’t care. No emotional outburst could rattle his bone-dry heart. It had been four years since that tragedy, and ever since then he hadn’t felt a thing.

But Alice stopped and, in a strong voice, yelled...

“Please retract that statement!”

“...Excuse me?”

“I...I said...please retract that statement! L-Leon is not a monster!”

It was clear from her tone that this was not a point she was willing to back down on.

“...Don’t bother,” said Leon with a sigh. In the last four years, nobody had ever stood up for him before. It almost made him...happy, but such a thought was enough to spark his self-loathing once more.

Still, there was nothing for it now. Leon made to step between the big man and Alice to stop an altercation, but just as he did...

“You got guts, kid. I like you.”

A bellowing voice rang out across the guild. The man was so large, it seemed his shoulders would scrape the ceiling, with scars all across his arms and face.

The man Alice confronted seemed like a baby by comparison.

“I...it’s Velgo the Hawk!” he squealed, his brow erupting in sweat.

This man, Velgo Zahaj, was one of Yugoslavia’s heroes and a veteran adventurer besides. His was a face that Leon knew well. Yet Leon ignored him, making his way to the quest board, and after running his eyes over the notes posted there...

“Here, this one’ll do for today.”

Leon tore one off and brought it over to the counter, where he signed it. Then, having no more reason to stay here, he and Alice made for the exit. But just as they were about to reach it...

“Hold on, girl.”

“Eep?! Wh-wh-wh-wh-what is...it?”

“Word of friendly advice. Pack it up. Bein’ round that guy ain’t good for you.”

Suddenly, Alice’s frightful shivers stopped.

“You’re just another one of those—”

“Don’t get me wrong, kiddo. I’m only thinkin’ about you.”

“About me?”

Alice cocked her head in confusion. Velgo nodded and then spoke.

“Claire Redheart. Rheinhardt Crossline. You’ve heard of those two, right?”

Claire Redheart, the Second Hero of Salvation, and Rheinhardt Crossline, otherwise known as Shining Rheinhardt, Claire’s most gifted apprentice and the boy expected to succeed her.

Leon glared harshly at the man, but did nothing.

“They lost their lives during the Festival of the Holy Spirit four years ago. By the hand of *your friend there*.”

“Allegedly,” Alice corrected.

“Yeah, you’re right. They never did find any proof. But everyone knows it was that lousy corpse. I mean, you just gotta ask yourself who benefitted, huh?”

But nothing the man said could change Alice's mind. She simply did not believe it. Perhaps Velgo noticed this, for his face contorted into a wry smile, and he said, "I don't buy it either. There's no motive could have possessed that man to take the life of his two friends. But what I'm sayin' flies regardless of whether the boy's a killer or not. I'm talkin' about what he is, missy. I don't think you're ready for that."

Velgo's next words seemed to come with some distress, but that didn't stop him from saying them.

"If you wanna be happy, you'll leave him and never look back. I'm tellin' ya, wherever that kid goes, death is sure to follow."

Misfortune came to all who stood by Leon's side. That was Velgo's warning.

"It don't bother me, of course. Death comes for us all sooner or later. Occupational hazard. But what about you, missy? You sure you won't regret this?"

Velgo could tell at a glance that Alice's main motivation was her own happiness. And yet...

"I...I won't! I'll...stay by his side! There's nowhere else for me to go!"

Velgo smiled at the girl's answer, but Leon frowned grimly.

She's stubborn. Almost like...

Velgo seemed to be thinking the same thing. He looked up at Leon with a thick smile and said, "Hey. Doesn't she remind you of somebody?"

"...Hmph."

Leon avoided his gaze aloofly, which made the giant burst into laughter. Then he faced Alice and added, "Well, stay safe, missy. If you change your mind, you can always come party up with me."

Then he turned his large back to them, ending the conversation. In response, Leon strode out of the guild. Alice followed alongside him and, after a few moments' hesitation, asked...

"It's...not true, is it? What that man said. What you did to your old friends. It's not true, is it?"

“...Velgo wasn’t lying,” Leon replied. “Most of what happened that day is as people think. Four years ago, during the Festival of the Holy Spirit, a horde of fiends attacked the town. And the one who brought those fiends here...was me.”

Leon’s words were a densely wound web of truth and lies, impossible to unravel.

The massacre at Yugosland. The people’s sorrow. They were all...

“...My fault. It’s all my fault. I destroyed it all. And...”

This was Leon’s confession. The manifest weight of his sin.

“...I was the one who killed Master and Rheina.”



Leon and Alice boarded a carriage and set off for their next destination.

“Ah! Look over there! Horses! Wild horses!”

Ever since departing, Alice’s eyes had been glued to the window, yelling and pointing at everything that went by. She seemed eager to keep the trip interesting, but for Leon, her excitement was nothing but an unwelcome nuisance.

“...Don’t you know how to sit quietly?”

“Ugh. S-sorry. B-but there aren’t any other passengers; I’m not disturbing anyone.”

“You’re disturbing me. Now sit down.”

“Huh? A-are you trying to say...m-my witty banter isn’t good enough for you?”

What witty banter? Leon wanted to ask but refrained. He simply shrugged, and Alice made an indecipherable expression before muttering under her breath, “You really don’t smile anymore...”

“Ghouls can’t smile,” Leon replied. “We don’t have emotions.”

“That’s not true,” Alice shot back, and slowly raising her head, she looked Leon directly in his crimson eyes. “I remember you, you know. Just a little, but

I've seen you before. With Claire and Rheinhardt. You were always smiling back then."

Did we really meet each other in the past? thought Leon. But deep beneath the surface, dark clouds roiled. Before he knew it, Leon opened his mouth...to deny his own emotions before they revealed themselves.

"It doesn't matter whether I used to smile or not. What difference does it make to you? Whatever we were in the past, you and I are strangers now."

After he finished speaking, Leon regretted his words. What was he doing, letting some kid's optimism get to him?

"...Sorry. That was out of line."

"N-no, I was at fault too. I dug up old wounds you weren't comfortable discussing..."

The carriage fell silent. But only a few moments later, Alice opened her mouth again.

"I don't think this is a pleasant topic either, but I must tell you... I want to make you smile. I can't go on watching you cry like this."

"...Ghouls don't cry. Like I said, we don't have emotions."

"No, you are crying. Inside... Just like I was."

Alice didn't want to anger Leon, but still she spoke. It was all the lead-up to her next statement.

"I want to heal your troubled heart, Leon. I want you to smile again. That's why I'm not going to give up. Not ever."



Karna village was a small mountainside community of less than a thousand people. The village was highly traditional, and the buildings and lifestyles were quite antiquated. Outside, farmers toiled in the fields, each turning a suspicious eye toward the outsiders in their midst. It was clear from the looks on their faces that they treated Leon and Alice as intruders into their isolated community.

Or at least, the adults did.

“Hey, mister! Lady!”

“Are you two adventurers? Where do you come from? Tell us a story!”

The children only displayed welcoming smiles. However, there was little point in conversing with them, and Leon ignored their badgering. Alice, on the other hand...

“This man is actually one of the Heroes of Salvation! We’ve come a long way to help your village!”

Her usual timidity was nowhere to be found. When talking to children, Alice’s innate cheeriness came to the fore. But Leon only found her actions bothersome.

“Are you going to talk to the elder?” one of them asked.

“We’ll show you the way!” said the other. “As long as you tell us a story after you—”

“Get away from them!”

A gruff man working in the fields interrupted the child’s eager request. He puffed himself up and walked over to the pair.

“Didn’t your parents tell you not to speak to outsiders? Do you want to catch their *ills*?!”

It was sadly the way around these parts to pin any calamity on outsiders.

“Why are you being so mean?” the kids cried. “They’ve come to save our village! Why are you mad at them?!”

The children’s souls were beautiful and pure...but they lacked the power to make their ideals a reality.

“Don’t talk back, you cheeky brats! Now get the hell outta here before I give you a hiding!”

They were only kids, after all. They couldn’t speak out against the tyranny of the grown-ups. The moment the farmer’s fist came down, they scattered in all directions, crying.

“Tch...”

Giving a rude tut to the two outsiders, the farmer turned and walked away.

“...Why do grown-ups never talk to children properly?” asked Alice, forlorn.

It wasn't because the village hated kids that they used violent means to keep their children in line. They were trying to protect them, and Alice knew that. But that only made it sadder. It was as if the adults simply didn't know the best way of dealing with the situation.

“...My master said that sometimes love drives a person to do things they don't want to,” said Leon.

There was no better emblem of that sentiment than what the pair encountered after a few minutes' walk. By the side of the road was a house emitting a putrid stench, and parts of it were falling off. It was coated in human waste, and it even looked like the other villagers had been throwing stones at it.

“Looks like the infected and their families are treated the same everywhere,” Leon noted.

Blue-Eye, the disease that turned people into fiends. There was no cure, and just like the Shroud, its precise cause was unknown.

“...Blue-Eye is believed to be contagious, just like other diseases, even though there's never been any evidence to suggest it's true,” Leon said.

Many people could live knowing they might turn into a fiend at any time. But when it was their loved ones on the line...they could be driven to do the unthinkable.

“Can't we do something?”

“All we can offer is a temporary reprieve. After we leave, there's no telling what will happen.”

In all likelihood, the villagers would go right back to their persecution without ever thinking that what they were doing was wrong.

“The only way to end this is to banish the Shroud, kill all the fiends, and put a stop to this disease once and for all... But we both know that's not going to happen.”

Perhaps once, he had harbored such hopes. If Claire and Rheinhardt were still around, they probably would have made an effort to save these people. But they were gone, and any idealistic fancies died with them.

Everything now was Leon's fault. As Alice walked alongside him, she turned and said, "Nothing's impossible, Leon. You will save the world. I know you will."

She really believed it. But Leon laughed it off and kept moving.

Then the pair arrived at the house of the village elder, the client for Alice's quest.

"As stated in my humble request, I would be much obliged to receive the services of two capable goblin-slayers such as yourselves."

The elder bent down and adopted a meek, servile attitude. It was the behavior of someone begging for salvation.

"The fiends inhabit a cave in the mountains behind the village. Our people are going missing every time they forage for herbs in the forest..."

He continued to implore Leon, throwing away his dignity. The reason for that was...

"They took my dear daughter captive! Please, you must save her!"

"...It'll be dealt with."

Leon left the elder's house and went straight to the mountains in question. On the way, he addressed Alice, who walked alongside him.

"I said before that novice adventurers ought to focus on quests to build up experience instead of entering dungeons. That's because of how fiends behave. Broadly speaking, they can be divided into two different kinds..."

"You mean the mistborn and the illborn, right?"

"Exactly. The former are humans mutated by the Shroud. It takes away their intelligence but makes them physically strong in return. The latter are humans who succumb to Blue-Eye. They're smarter but weaker than their mistborn

counterparts. The other difference is that mistborn can't leave their lairs, which means it's mostly illborn fiends that plague humanity."

As they neared the cave, Leon continued.

"I chose a safe quest for today, but even if you get yourself into trouble, I'll save you. However, *I won't protect you*. Bear that in mind."

"Um...aren't saving and protecting the same thing?"

"No, they're not. Saving you is my obligation. Protecting you is my prerogative. And I don't protect anyone. Ever."

That was his self-imposed curse. Leon lost the right to call himself a protector the day his friends lost their lives.

As their conversation drew to a close, the two of them arrived at the entrance to the cave.

"...Let's head in."

"O-okay."

Attempting to steady her rattling knees, Alice took a few tentative steps inside, and then...

"U-um, Leon? Wh-what are you doing?"

He crouched down, one ear pressed to the ground.

"Be quiet," he said. "Don't distract me."

With that curt response, Leon focused intently on listening, picking up the sound waves reverberating through the cavern floor.

Ghouls lacked a sense of taste, and their sight, smell, and touch were all less sensitive than a normal human's. However, their hearing was extraordinary, and in locations with lots of echoes, like caves, they could detect things other people couldn't.

"Thirty-eight fiends," he said. "And...seven people."

"Oh, my!" Alice gasped. "Then we must go and help them at once!"

"...Yes. We must grant them their *salvation*."

The two made their way deeper into the cavern, guided by the lights of burning torches affixed to the rocky walls.

“An illborn goblin is about as strong as a normal adult male with no Source-manipulating ability,” Leon explained. “Their senses are no stronger than a human’s either, and they can’t see in darkness.”

Thus, the goblins’ den would become their graveyard. It wasn’t long before Leon spotted three goblins, standing just before a turn in the tunnel.

“You wait here and watch,” he said.

Leon raised the pistol in his left hand, taking careful aim at the torch providing the goblins with light. The gun fired, and the cave was plunged into darkness.

The goblins were thrown into a panic. The Reaper drew near.

The “battle” lasted all of three seconds. One per rotten puddle that lay around him at the end of it all.

“...May your rest be eternal salvation.”

Leon muttered his prayer and glanced back toward Alice. “Come,” he said, before venturing deeper into the cave.

The path was a bloodbath. After Leon mercilessly dispatched another group of goblins, Alice turned to him and asked, “Um...am I only here to watch? Isn’t this supposed to be a test?”

“It is a test,” Leon replied. “Not of your skills but of your mind. So, yes. Watch.”

Alice didn’t understand what Leon meant by that. Leon could tell she didn’t see what he had in mind and started to wonder if he was making a mistake. While he chewed on that, Alice suddenly spoke.

“Still, I can see how strong you are,” she said. “Nothing like the ghouls I know.”

“...Yeah,” Leon replied. “I’m not like other ghouls. The others of my kind are unintelligent and are rated as Class Four fiends, slightly above a goblin. I’m special.”

It sounded like he was boasting, but Leon knew there was nothing to be proud of.

“I regenerate any fatal wounds instantly,” he added, “and my arm can tear a human to shreds. I also possess a superhuman level of hearing and a human intelligence that allows me to use these skills to the fullest... All the ingredients to become a powerful force, held back only by my heart.”

“Your...heart?”

“That’s right... I used to be a coward. I hid behind my master and fellow apprentice, shaking in my boots. I was pathetic.”

Leon sighed and stopped speaking. Any more and he would open old wounds he didn’t want to revisit.

“Anyway, you’re starting to let your guard down. Keep it together.”

“Y-yes! I’m sorry. B-but...you’re far stronger than any of the fiends in this place...”

“Nothing’s safe when you’re out adventuring. And something stinks about this job.”

“Ah. Now that you mention it, the stench is quite unbearable this far in.”

“...True. They’re *creating* something. Hence the smell.”

“Creating something? You mean like a trap? A weapon?”

“You’ll see. For now, we need to find out about their leader.”

If it was just a particularly strong goblin leading them, that would be no problem.

“Intel is an adventurer’s best friend. What kind of fiends are there? How many? What are their strengths and weaknesses? Knowing the answers to these questions can be the difference between life and death.”

“That’s true. Weren’t you the Adviser back when you worked with Claire and Rheinhardt?”

“...That’s right, I was.”

“How does it work? How do you find things out about the enemy?”

“Mostly deduction based on clues they leave behind... For example, if you use chemicals on their feces, you can find out its composition, and thus work out what species you’re dealing with. Plus—”

Some people have special abilities that let them find out more about a fiend, he was about to say, when...

“Wha?! Wh-what’s that?!”

“A mural. Painted in human blood, by the look of it.”

It wasn’t particularly artistic. It looked like a child had just slapped red paint on a canvas. But it was clear what the mural depicted.

A brother and sister, hands joined in peaceful harmony.

“Usually, when goblins make wall art like this, they use their own excreta. It serves the same purpose as cats or dogs marking their territory. Whenever they use blood...that means it’s just for fun. And the species that most enjoys that sort of behavior is...”

A vampire. But just as the thought occurred, a faint memory stirred and filled him with anger.

“L-Leon?”

Alice’s voice snapped Leon back to reality. He took a deep breath to calm himself.

“...We need to find out who made this painting. And the quickest way to do that is to use my power.”

Leon stepped toward the painting for a closer look.

“If I don’t come back,” he said, “give me a shake, will you?”

“Huh?”

Alice didn’t have time to wonder what Leon meant before he reached out and touched the painting. And as he did...

The corpse’s mind was filled with **someone else’s memories.**

“Wh-what are you doing, Father?!”

“Out of the way, Eren. There’s no cure, you know that. The only answer now...is death. Otherwise, she’ll turn out just like your mother.”

“Help me, Eren!”

I stood in front of the trembling girl.

“I told you, Father. A brother always stands up for his little sister!”

“She’s not your sister anymore!”

There was a struggle. I took the knife. Excitement. The gleaming blade.

...And red.

Red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red red.

Everything my eyes fell upon was dyed a deep crimson.

“...Father...”

After that, the memory receded, and Leon returned to the real world.

“L-Leon?”

“...The reason I was my team’s Adviser was because I possess a special ability.”

“A special ability?”

“That’s right. I can read the minds of fiends. I can see their pasts, their thoughts, everything.”

The reason Leon had this ability was because he was a Red-Eye.

Most fiends were Blue-Eyes, who, as the name suggested, possessed azure eyes. Those with crimson eyes were rare examples who managed to keep their humanity. That was what made Leon such an effective Adviser.

“The person who painted this mural used to be a young boy who wished to protect his sister. In my experience, people like that tend to end up becoming quite large.”

The younger the child, the bigger they wished to be. It was an obvious expression of strength to someone like that.

“A child who wants to protect. A beast that paints with blood. Based on all this information...it’s highly likely we’re dealing with an ogre.”

“An ogre? Not a hobgoblin?”

“That’s what most people would think. Most fiend hordes are led by a larger specimen of the same species. But there are exceptions to every rule, and this is one of them. Just keep in mind that an ogre is a Class Two fiend; much more dangerous than a regular hobgoblin.”

“M-my, how scary. B-but you can beat it, right, Leon?”

“...Yeah. Of course I can.”

Leon couldn’t answer any other way.

“...Let’s keep moving.”

With heightened caution, the pair advanced through the tunnels. The voyage was not difficult; Leon managed to surprise attack many of the goblins they came across, reducing them to rotten puddles and pilfering their Testament Stones. There was no sign of this supposed ogre leader at all, and soon Leon began to worry.

“Something stinks about this place.”

“Indeed. My nose is about to fall off...”

That wasn’t what Leon had meant, but Alice wasn’t exactly wrong either. The stench seemed to be getting worse with each passing second. For Alice, who still possessed a normal sense of smell, it must have been torture.

But it meant that Leon’s destination was drawing closer. He walked a few steps farther, then stopped.

“You stay here,” he said to Alice. “Don’t move a muscle until I call for you.”

Leon left Alice behind and ventured forward into a wide-open space. As he did so, he muttered to himself, “Not exactly what I had in mind, but I suppose it’s what I asked for.”

He couldn't show this to Alice as it was. It would shatter her mind. Leon shot out the torch, as before, and shrouded the area in a veil of darkness. After slaughtering the goblins there, he took one more look around.

"Should be a little better now the place isn't so lit up," he pondered. He called over to Alice, who entered into the wide stone chamber. It was mostly natural, with some minor goblin modifications.

"...Gasp!"

As soon as Alice set foot inside, her eyes went wide.

The room was filled with an eye-watering stench. It was made up of the goblins' odor as well as that of their excrement and one other thing that Alice didn't realize until it was too late.

She could hardly be blamed. After all, it was a smell that a wholesome young lady like her would have never had reason to encounter.

The last and most overwhelming component of the uncontainable stench... was goblin semen.

"...Ghk."

The ground was littered with bodies. All of them belonged to human women. Their clothes had been stripped off, and their arms and legs clumsily amputated. To the goblins, the limbs were an unnecessary hindrance. These were not prisoners but tools.

Alice felt something heave inside her.

"Urgh...!"

She threw up onto the floor. She shuddered violently, and her eyes were wet with tears. Watching her pitiable state, Leon spoke in a quiet, solemn tone.

"Velgo said I only bring misfortune to people. There's no denying that."

He looked around at the bodies.

"...ill...me..."

One of them spoke. She spoke for them all.

"Kill...me..."

The weeping of the womenfolk filled the chamber. It was like a prayer. Leon nodded...and rescued them from their living hell with a bullet to the head.

“We Heroes of Salvation,” he said, “must, more than anyone else, respect life. We must save as many lives as we can. And that means that, sometimes, we find ourselves in situations like this.”

If you stay with me, you'll carry this pain with you wherever you go. Do you really want that to happen?

Leon knew nobody would ever choose to live like that. From now on, the two would have nothing to do with— “I won't leave you. Ever.”

Leon was shaken. His face betrayed no emotion, but the next words out of his mouth made it clear.

“I...don't understand.”

How did she come to that conclusion? Leon could not fathom what chain of reasoning or emotion had led her to that point.

“Are you after my inheritance?”

“I don't need anything like that.”

“My social status? Just so you know, I don't have any.”

“I don't want anything like that.”

Then why? Leon's mind ground to a halt as he struggled to comprehend.

Just then...

“Ugh...ah...”

A faint, tortured groan from somewhere far off revealed the location of the last survivor. Leon found himself using their existence as an excuse to escape.

“...Let's head over.”

Leon did not wait for his disciple's response. He set off walking at once to flee the labyrinth of his own thoughts. Like a loyal puppy, Alice followed.

“Um...,” she said. “I've been counting the enemies we've encountered so far, and I make it thirty-seven. That means there's only one left. It must be the

leader, right? The ogre?”

“No. From what I can hear, it sounds like a goblin.”

“Huh? But then...where did the ogre go?”

“That’s what I’ve been wondering,” Leon replied. “Think back to the entrance, when I told you how many enemies there were. Was there anything strange about that number?”

“Y-yes. I thought it seemed a little low.”

“Exactly. Thirty-eight is far too low. To form a horde like this, you need at least two hundred.”

“And yet there’s not even a fifth of that number here. How could that be?”

“If I had to say, it’s because of cannibalism. Most fiends don’t attack others of their species, but goblins are an exception. When there’s not enough food to go around, they resort to eating each other. Reduces the number of mouths, and feeds the rest. The thing is...when there’s a strong leader in place, that doesn’t happen.”

“Because he steps in and stops them from fighting?”

“Precisely. Fiends powerful enough to lead a horde usually have a strong sense of teamwork. They stay within their territory to keep the others in line.”

“B-but...we’ve searched this whole cave and haven’t seen any fiends strong enough to be the leader.”

“No. That’s why something stinks about this job.”

The dwindling numbers. The absent commander. What did it all mean?

Minds whirring with the myriad possibilities, Leon and Alice came at last to the deepest caverns of the tunnel network.

There, a new and even more horrifying sight awaited them.

“Agh...gah...ghh...”

“Hii-hii-hii! Hii-hii-hii-hii-hii! Meat! Meat! Meat!”

In a small stone chamber, the final goblin thrust his hips repeatedly, lying atop

his poor victim, who grunted in pain.

“Grh...ghh...ah...”

Leon approached and addressed the oblivious fiend. “You must really be enjoying that. Didn’t notice I was here?”

Then, he grabbed the goblin by the scruff of the neck, tore him away, and launched him into the wall, where he was smashed to bits.

“Who...are you? ...Adventurers...?”

The woman still seemed sane. Her eyes were glazed over, but there was still a trace of strength in her voice.

“That’s right,” Leon replied. “The village elder sent us. We’ve come to slay the goblins.”

“The...elder...,” she spoke between pants, as though squeezing out what little energy remained. “The village...is in danger... A few days...ago...someone came... They told...the fiends...to attack...the village... To dig...a tunnel...”

“...Who was it who said this? Did you see their face?”

“I...only heard...their voice... A pretty voice...like...an angel...”

“...Thank you. Thanks to you, the mystery is solved.”

The mystery of the missing goblins. The mystery of the absent leader. It was all planned.

At the back of the stone chamber was another large tunnel. No doubt it led to Karna Village.

“They left behind their weakest and attacked the village. Probably just as we were entering the cave.”

“Th-then that means the village is...!”

A terrifying thought occurred to Alice. But the woman on the floor already knew what she was about to say.

“Please...! Save...the village...!” she pleaded as tears streamed down her face. Leon took no time to respond.

“I will. Now...rest.”

“Thank...you.”

With the woman’s gratitude still ringing in his ears, Leon took his pistol, pointed it between her eyes...and sent her tortured soul to heaven.

“...I always feel so powerless,” he said after it was done.

If only Claire were here. If only Rheinhardt were here.

Then perhaps this story would have ended differently.

“I’m the Hero of Salvation, but what I can offer is only a false one. What a wretched tale.”

A dry, rasping voice, wet with heat.

Seeing this, Alice attempted to summon up what courage she could.

“Even if you feel powerless, you can’t bring yourself to give up, can you?”

“No. That is the fate I inherited alongside my title. I will never run from that.”

Leon thought of the lives he’d taken within the system of caves.

The women, whose dignity had been stripped from them and who begged for the sweet release of death.

The fiends, once human and once possessed of sacred souls.

“No more sorrow, no more sin.”

That was why the Hero of Salvation was here.

A fire in his heart, the corpse took off down the tunnel.



As Leon’s left leg was a steel replica, he couldn’t run like he used to, but he could still travel at great speeds by hopping, like a pebble skipping on a pond. Hurtling down the mountain path, he soon arrived at its base and continued on toward Karna Village.

I should be concentrating on my legs...but I just can’t stop thinking about it. That person the woman mentioned who riled up the goblin horde... Could it be?

A memory of someone surfaced in his mind. A reunion Leon had been awaiting ever since that tragic day four years ago. If they were behind all this, and if Leon could see them again...

It's unlikely I'll win...but I need to try. It's the only reason I'm still alive.

With these conflicting emotions swirling in his mind, Leon soon arrived at the heart of the chaos. The village was under attack by goblins. The watch fought bravely, but they were badly outnumbered.

"Looks bad. They're not going to last much longer," he said.

"Wh-what can we do?" asked Alice.

"Goblins are cowards by nature. If we take out their leader, they'll rout."

Using his superhuman hearing, Leon picked out a likely prospect.

"I'll head west from here and eliminate the commander. You see if you can help anyone on the way. Get them away from here, but leave the fighting to me. Understood?"

"Y-yes!" replied Alice.

Her face was pallid with fright, but in her heart a fire burned. She would stick by Leon's side no matter what, and she would save the people that needed saving.

"...Where do you get that courage from, I wonder?"

Leon sighed. He didn't know whether to be impressed or shocked. He simply took his pistol in hand and fired in the direction of an old man who had fallen on his backside. The bullet whizzed through the air...and pierced the skull of the goblin about to swing his axe, turning him into a puddle of flesh juice.

"Over here, sir!"

Alice pulled the man to his feet and helped him evacuate. These days, every village like this had a large shed to use as an emergency shelter. Its sturdy construction would keep the villagers safe.

Of course, there were fiends for which even the shelter would prove no greater impediment than a sheet of paper, but for the current crisis, it would

suffice, if only because Leon's target was no longer present.

"Did he sense I was here and leave? Or...?"

Leon could never predict *his* moves. Still, his absence meant Leon could focus on his main task.

Kill the leader. Save the villagers. Head west.

Soon, Leon and Alice came across the body of a fallen villager. It was the farmer from before, the one who had accused outsiders like Leon and Alice of harboring the disease and who tried to warn the village children away from them. His back was unmarred, and even face down in death, he gripped his machete. He must have stood bravely in defense of his village until the very end.

Like how I should have died... Giving your life so that others may live, to become the cornerstone of a brighter future... I won't let it be in vain, my friend.

Leon looked ahead, from where he felt an immense pressure bearing down on him.

"Help...us..."

They were there; the four children who were curious about Leon and Alice earlier in the day and came over to talk to them. The thing standing over them was huge with black skin the color of deepest night.

As soon as Leon saw it, **another memory began to play.**

I wanted to grow up big and strong, like the hero from my storybooks, so I could protect my little sister.

"What's going to happen to us now, big brother...?"

"It's okay. I'll take care of you."

Father lay still in a growing puddle of red. I took my sister's hand and fled the village. There was nothing for us there now.

"We'll head to the next town. There must be people there who can..."

Surely someone, somewhere in this big, wide world, knew a cure for my

sister's disease, I thought.

...However.

“Wh-what? But you said if I paid you, you'd cure her!”

“I was lyin', obviously. There ain't no cure for Blue-Eye. Once you catch it, it's over.”

The town was not as warm and welcoming as I'd imagined. It brought no hope; only despair.

So we fled into the mountains. And there, we grew weak.

“Big brother...I'm hungry...”

“Wait here. I'll go find us something to eat.”

All I could do was watch as my sister became less and less by the day. I became thinner too and started forgetting things.

“Ah...ahhh...”

The longer I went on living, the hungrier I got. Almost everything edible I found, I gave to her.

“Ugh...gh...ah...”

But one day, everything changed. All I can remember is eating until my stomach was fit to burst. It tasted sweeter than anything I ever thought possible.

“Big...brother...”

I remember hearing my sister's weakening voice.

...and when I next awoke, she was gone.

My mouth dripped with a nectar of unparalleled sweetness.

“Where are you?!”

I screamed. I shouted her name across the mountains.

But I never heard her reply.

I left the cave and stepped in a puddle of red. My eyes in the reflection were

blue, just like hers.

I was happy. But it made me miss her all the more.

“I need...to find her.”

As the memory ended, it coincided with reality.

“Leon!”

Alice’s warning rang in his ears. The corpse moved like a whip. A reflexive gunshot. The bullet found its mark in the creature threatening the children...but failed to get through its jet-black skin.

“Ugh...Aaaaah...”

Emitting a dull groan, the monster slowly turned toward Leon.

An ogre. That was the name for him now. That was what he had become. The boy who wanted to grow big and strong to protect his sister. His wish was granted and denied in the same foul moment.

And yet he still didn’t realize it.

“Nooo...! You’re...not her...”

Even now, he searched. For something he would never find.

“I pity you,” Leon said with a crimson glint in his eye, aiming his handgun. “But that is why I must destroy you.”

“I...I’ll help!” said Alice.

“No. Stay out of the way. You won’t land one scratch on him with your weapon. You’ll only get yourself killed.”

Sit back and watch, he was saying. *Don’t even help the children get to safety.* With that, he dashed into battle, firing a silver bullet at his invulnerable foe. Once again, the bullet failed to pierce its mark and bounced off the creature’s boulder-like skin.

The ogre’s sorrowful expression slowly turned to irritation, as though he had just been bitten by a fly.

“Rooooooooooaghhh!”

In an instant, the beast closed the distance, his thick arm whistling in the wind. Leon sprang back to avoid it. The attack failed to even graze, but Leon felt its power nonetheless.

“...One slip and I’m done for.”

Realizing this, Leon’s hand went to his belt, to the holy sword, Calit Gelius. His master’s sword, with power enough to slay any fiend, no matter what protections it boasted.

However, as Leon gripped the handle, lightning flew from the jet-black scabbard, defying his touch.

Calit Gelius had a will of its own. It chose its wielder, and rejected those it deemed wanting. Leon was allowed to touch the sword, but Calit Gelius had never once let him draw it.

It was as if it was saying, *“Do not presume upon my aid.”*

“...All right, then. Just watch. I’ll win this on my own.”

His fingers trembled, but Leon Crossheart did not back down.

“Come, my brethren,” he said, his eyes burning with conviction. A moment later...

“Grooooooooooooooooooah!”

...the ogre attacked.

Leon leaped aside to dodge its fist, like a slung hammer, before closing his eyes.

His world went dark. He surrendered his sight, honing his inhuman hearing.

“Grooh... Roooooooooaghh!”

Leon carved each one of those sounds upon himself. Their wild volume. Their terrifying rhythm. He leaped, evading a whirlwind of blows, each one deepening his understanding. Then, at last, he heard the truth concealed within them.

*“Groooooooooo **Where are you?** aaaaaaaah!”*

The boy...was crying.

*“Rrgh... Rrooo **Where did you go? ooooooogh!**”*

Behind that feral noise. Between each harrowing beat...

*“Groooooaaaa **I have to aaaa protect you! aaaaaaaaaaagh!**”*

...was his pain.

*“Roaaa **I will aaaaaa protect aaaa my sister! aaaaaaaah!**”*

Then, after dodging countless blows, and with his eyes still closed, Leon spoke.

“Exhaust thy passions and be silent, for the Lord invites you into His presence. Let thy soul be purified, and receive His forgiveness. Then shall the Lord take and cleanse thy sin, and thou shalt be saved.”

It was a passage from scripture. A prayer for the soul of a wretched criminal about to depart.

Leon slowly opened his eyes and looked at the approaching ogre.

“Groooooaaaaagh!”

As the beast swung its massive limb, the corpse lowered his eyelids.

“Let anguish be my guide. Fist of Apollogest. The fire’s glimmer. The red monkey’s eyes.”

Leon’s steel right arm responded instantly, with geometric patterns appearing across its surface. The next moment, in the darkness of the night, one of the dark limb’s powers was revealed.

“Arts of Steel, Deploy. Abominable Armament Number Two: The Fire King’s Cleansing Flame, *Shining Finger*.”

Responding to his call, the steel prosthetic melted and adopted a different shape: that of a giant lance. It was covered in shimmering shapes and was composed of many ringlike segments.

Then the rings began rotating, spinning. The immense friction turned the lance a burning red, and it radiated such heat that Leon’s skin soon started to bubble and melt, battling the ghoul’s unnatural regenerative abilities.

Anyone who saw him would think the same thing. He was killing himself, over and over again. And they would be right. This was the power that dwelled within Leon's false arm. This was the reason it was created.

It was a tool for a monster to kill a monster.

Now, with that power at his hand...

"...I shall impale you."

The creature's hide was tough as steel, but it was no match for Leon's superheated spike. The boy once lost his home under his father's crimson flow. Now he would lose his life to that same hue.

"Ah...ah..."

From his open mouth came a voice. And then, the ogre wept.

"Gloria..."

His whole body slowly melted into a fetid puddle. A shining green Testament Stone lay in its center. Leon picked it up, and...

"May your rest be eternal salvation."

He prayed. For the misery-stricken boy and his sister. May they meet again in Paradise.

"Look! The goblins are running away!"

It seemed the goblins all instinctually knew of the death of their commander. They fled the village in a mass exodus.

"...It's over."

Leon staggered. The powers within his false arm and leg were great, but their costs in Source consumption were great also. Unable to stay upright, the ghoul fell to one knee.

"Mr. Hero!"

"Are you okay?"

The children he protected came rushing over to check on him. Just as he was about to answer them...

“Look out!” Alice cried. “He’s coming from the right!”

From out of the bushes, one smaller goblin leaped at Leon, sword drawn. But the ghoul didn’t register him as a threat. Instead...

“...You’ll make a fine meal.”

He turned and gripped the creature’s face with the fingers of his steel right arm.

“Ghh! Geh...gah!”

The goblin’s brave attack sliced a tear in Leon’s coat, lacerating his pallid skin. But the ghoul paid no attention to his own dripping blood. He only drew the trapped beast closer while lowering his mask.

Leon Crossheart was not only a human, he was also a monster. That was why no matter what he did, society treated him like one.

The look in the villagers’ eyes was proof enough.

“...What is that?”

They stared, shocked, and muttered among themselves, watching the ghoul partake of his meal. Leon sliced the fiend’s belly and consumed his entrails while the prey still lived. From the goblin’s lips came constant screams of agony, almost as if he was saying, *Just kill me already*.

It was such a horrifying sight that even the villagers started to feel a little sorry for the fiend.

“Urgh...!”

Several people vomited. The ghoul continued feasting on his catch...until about one-third of the way through his meal, when the goblin finally expired. The corpse immediately deteriorated into a rotting puddle.

“Damn... I was enjoying that.”

Leon lifted his face. Wet chunks fell from his red-stained mouth. His crimson, glowing eyes scanned the crowd and fell on a small girl. One of the children who called out to him and Alice shortly after they arrived in the village.

The goblin ambush just now must have rattled her. She had fallen to the

ground, shivering in fright.

Poor thing.

Leon slowly walked over to her and held out his hand.

All he wanted to do was help a girl stand herself up.

However, the other villagers could only see one thing. Even the children who had been kind to him at first.

All they saw was a monster choosing his next victim.

“G-get away from her!”

The children stood in his way. Their teeth chattered, their knees rattled, but still they stared Leon down.

“I-if you lay a finger on Atolie, I’ll...!”

His face was fierce and determined. Seeing it, Leon was overcome with self-pity.

“What am I even trying to do...?”

Who would ever accept his hand? The hand not of a fellow man, but of an inhuman brute?

Nobody. His mind clouded in red mist, Leon had forgotten that. And so he had made a mistake. He had allowed himself to think, for one small moment, that he could live among them.

“...I’m sorry.”

Leon apologized and turned away. The villagers saw him not as the savior of their home, but as a new foe, to be treated with fear and revulsion.

Amid a wave of pitch-dark hate, Leon replaced his mask, hid his face, and turned to Alice.

“Do you still...?”

He had meant to sound uninterested, dispassionate.

But Leon couldn’t stop the emotion leaking through the cracks in his heart.

“Do you still want to stand with a monster like me?” he asked.

Alice must have noticed it, for she shone back a smile brighter than the sun.

“You are not a monster,” she said. “You are the Hero of Salvation.”

The sincerity of her words was clear in her expression.

The ghoul scoffed, then began dragging his left leg as he walked toward her.

“...Let’s go,” he said.

“Yes!”

They walked side by side.

“I ended up leaving everything to you this time, Leon. But I promise you I’ll pull my weight on the next job!”

She walked slowly, keeping pace with the crippled ghoul. Then she took his hand.

His crimson-stained hand. The one everyone else rejected.

“...You’ll get blood on you,” he said.

“I don’t mind.”

Leon made no attempt to free himself from her grip. He could shake her off no longer.

Alice seemed to take that as validation...and acceptance.



“I’m very pleased to be working under you, *Master Leon*.”

There was nothing Leon could say to that pleasant smile, those grateful words.

Even though he’d planned to fail her from the beginning.

Even though he’d sworn never to get close to anybody again.

All he could say was...

“...You’re a fool.”

But which one of them was he referring to? Her, for making the wrong choice? ...No. There was only one person here deserving of his spiteful words.

“...You’re a fool.”

He said it again, then sighed. A sigh as cold as the body that housed it.

And yet...for the first time in four years, a flicker of warmth returned to that tired old corpse.

The Reluctant Ghoul and the Persistent Girl

A shine lost.

Salvation destroyed.

Yet, even thrust back into nothingness, I am not left with nothing.

I still remember that face. That smiling, weeping face.

Rheinhardt Crossline was always strong and trustworthy. He was a man who shone brighter than any star.

"How can you be like that?" I once asked.

"It's the power of love," he'd replied.

"...Love? What's that?"

His words were a mystery to me back then. But in time, I came to understand.

"I love them both, don't I?"

And when I realized that, I hated myself. I only ever took from them and never gave anything back.

"What's the matter, partner? You're oddly serious today."

"...I want to be strong like you and Master."

I needed to. So that I could stand by their side proudly when the time came.

But when I told him that, he laughed.

"You're plenty strong already, partner."

"...You're lying. I've only been dragging you down."

He patted me reassuringly on the chest and said, *"Partner. You fight for*

others. That's all you need."

His golden eyes stared straight into mine.

"Stand tall. You're family. Our pride."

Our master, watching us spar, nodded approvingly.

"Your strength matters little," Rheinhardt went on. "What matters is trust. Whether we can count on you to do what's right when the time comes. And in that respect, Leon, there's no one I'd rather have at my side."

They trusted me. They believed in me. In a weak, pathetic ghoul.

But I failed them.

"...I will grow stronger, I swear. Strong enough to protect both of you."

That was the oath I'd made to myself.

"One more round, Rheina. This time, I'll land a hit on you for sure."

"Heh. That's the spirit, partner."

For their sake, I felt I could do anything.

For their sake, I would even die.

That was what I thought.

But I...



The day after returning to town from Karna Village, Leon awoke to the sound of birdsong.

"...Guess the girl's still asleep."

Alice's ordeal had exhausted her, both physically and mentally, so she didn't come to wake Leon up like she had previously. She was still sound asleep in her room.

Leon sat up and got out of bed.

"Hwoooooo..."

Breathing deeply, Leon focused on his limbs. This was martial exercise, a popular workout routine with roots in ancient combat techniques. To many people, that was all it was, but those who saw frequent battle used it differently.

Following the forms exactly as prescribed demanded razor-fine control over one's body, and by repeating them daily, the movements became subconscious, resulting in a trance-like state. At that point, no amount of emotional unrest could destabilize a fighter in battle. It was possible to stay focused on the destruction of one's foe, no matter what happened in the midst of combat.

And Leon was at that point already. He wouldn't have believed it possible, back when he was training with Rheinhardt and Claire.

"Whoa... No offense, but that's awful."

"W-well, I'm sure if you keep practicing, you'll get better at it one day."

Leon thought back to those times. The other two executed their movements with practiced grace, while Leon always seemed as clumsy as ever.

But something had changed since then. And it wasn't hard to guess what.

The people Leon was trying so hard to catch up to were gone. Yet, if anything, that only made him strive harder.

"Loss brought me anger. And that anger propelled me to where I am now. To where I once aspired to be. Could there be anything more ironic?"

The grief did nothing to impede his movements. Over the last four years, he steadily became a master of the art.

At least this, he could do right.

"Hwooooooo..."

The forms complete, Leon exhaled one last time, then muttered to himself, "I need to be alone. Nobody can stand by my side."

Leon's tragic memories of the past denied him a happy present. He could only submit to their demands as he walked over to Alice's room.

"Wake up."

“Mmmnh... Mmm... Oh, Master... You’re appearing in my dreams now... That’s nice... Ehehehe...”

“This isn’t a dream. It’s real life. Now get up.”

“...Wait, you’re real?”

Alice quickly shook off her drowsiness.

“Aaahhh! M-my pajamas are all scruffy! And my hair’s a mess! Aaahhh!”

Her cheeks flushed pink, and she flew into a frenzy trying to make herself respectable.

“I’m a man of my word,” Leon said, ignoring her. “So I intend to keep my promise to you, though I might not like it. You can be my apprentice, but that means...”

Leon pointed a finger at the girl.

“...I have a duty to make you work. So we’re going to—”

“—start training at once?!”

Leon did not expect her eager reply. Surely she was still worn out from the day before. Who would want to train under those conditions? But Alice almost seemed to have been waiting for the suggestion.

“...You know, I’m not a kind teacher.”

“Yes, Master!”

“I’ll work you to the bone, until you’re begging me to stop.”

“Yes, Master! Thank you, Master!”

“If I hear one little complaint, you’ll be out on the streets. I don’t have time for imbeciles. Do I make myself clear?”

“Of course, Master!”

The ghoul sighed. Deeply. He’d been hoping that his “harsh master” persona would turn the girl off somewhat, but if anything, she seemed more eager than ever.

“Time to train! ♪ Time to train! ♪ Time to train, train, train! ♪”

Leon almost felt warmed by the pleasant light radiating off her, but he steeled his heart for what was to come.

I need to make her leave by any means necessary. It's time to be as strict as I possibly can.

Alice followed Leon into the basement, oblivious to his true motives.

"It...it's a little empty down here, isn't it? There's no fighting dummies or anything. Is it just a running track or something?"

"No. This is a state-of-the-art training arena."

Leon placed his hand on a spherical apparatus near the stairs and channeled his Source into it. Immediately, several shooting targets appeared in the center of the room. Alice's eyes went wide.

"Wh-where did they come from?!"

"This device is programmed to summon a number of illusions," Leon explained. "That lets us carry out all kinds of training simulations... Before that, though. I want to test your abilities. We'll start with marksmanship."

Leon put some commands into the device and a variety of projectile weapons appeared in front of the girl. She picked one up, a short bow. Perhaps she sought to impress her teacher by picking a weapon she was most comfortable with.

Her optimism would be short-lived if Leon had anything to say about it.

"I'll start the test. Get ready."

"Yes!"

I'll set it to the highest difficulty. She won't hit a single one.

Then he could say she wasn't fit to be his disciple, then cast her out. It pained him to be so cruel, but it had to be done.

However, things went very differently than expected.

She hit them all...?!

Leon's task consisted of twelve targets moving at high speed. Alice shot all of them in just seven seconds.

“Um...how was that, Master...?”

Alice’s angelic face lit up with hope, but Leon couldn’t possibly entertain her. He had to find fault somehow.

“...Nothing special,” he replied. “You still have a long way to go.”

“I... I see...”

Alice hung her head in disappointment. Leon felt an unbearable guilt and shook his head to dispel it.

There’s nothing I can fault with her ranged techniques, and she’s not bad in close combat either. But I can’t have her sticking around. I need to get rid of her, no matter what.

A devious plan came to mind. Leon had no other choice.

“This device,” he said, “can also summon fiends. They’re not real, of course, but I think a Class Four mistborn should be around your level.”

Alice was startled by the sudden appearance of a kobold in the center of the room. Perhaps it had brought some unpleasant memories to mind, just as Leon hoped it would.

“I want you to take this guy on. Unarmed, if you don’t mind.”

“Huh? Y-you want me to fight...without weapons?”

“It’s important to test your mental capabilities. Or we could stop now, if you prefer?”

Of course, Alice surely knew that such a choice would invite immediate dismissal.

She trembled with fright, but still a fire burned in the young lady’s eyes.

“I-if I win,” she said, turning to Leon. “D-do you think you could...pat me on the head?”

“Sure. If you win.”

Leon was confident it wouldn’t happen. The girl had talent, to be sure, but she lacked the mental fortitude to command it.

“...Begin.”

“Y-yes, Master!”

Dripping with sweat, quaking with fright, she stared down her foe. Leon saw himself in her stance.

She's a coward at heart, just like me.

And just like me, she can summon up courage when she needs to.

But...she can never pass this test. Because we're so similar.

The kobold may have been a projection, but its fighting prowess and terrifying presence were no less than the real thing. And Alice had to fight it bare-handed.

She'll only embarrass herself...just like I did.

...Or so Leon thought.

“Uh...ah...AAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!”

Even as the tears streamed down her face, Alice stood her ground and emitted a wild battle cry. That was already beyond Leon's wildest expectations.

“...Im...possible...”

Completely weaponless, she was nonetheless able not only to survive against the creature but gain the upper hand. And it wasn't long before the beastman fell; taking advantage of an opening, Alice leaped around to its back and wrapped her arms around its neck. Soon there was a crack like a snapped twig. Alice had broken her foe's neck.

“Haah... Haah... M-Master...!”

Alice collapsed onto her backside and looked over at Leon, a sparkle of hope in her deep, green eyes.

I did it, Master. Did you see that, Master? What do you think of that, Master?

Say something nice to me.

...Leon could not understand. Before he could answer her, he had to voice his own doubts.

“How...did you do that?” he asked.

“Um...well, I’ve been a hunter ever since I was a little girl. I guess I just kinda —”

“No. That’s not what I mean. I’m talking about your courage. Where does it come from?”

“H-huh? Erm... Th-the power of love! ...I guess? Ahahaha!”

Alice laughed. A nervous laugh that barely concealed her embarrassment.

Leon noticed his fists were tightly clenched. He thought of Claire and Rheinhardt. Her answer was the same as theirs.

“So...you love me? Is that what you’re trying to say?”

“Hwa?! W-well, I... I...er...”

Her cheeks, as smooth and scarlet as apple skin. Her waving hands, her stumbling lips.

They were all so hard to look at.

“...If love can surpass all limits. If love can be a source of courage, then...”

Perhaps I never loved them after all.

Perhaps he was right after all.

“M-Master?”

“...It’s nothing. That’s enough training for today.”

Leon turned as if to flee from that old memory, and the pain it brought.

“Listen to me. This is a simple payment. Don’t read anything more into it than that.”

He walked over to Alice...and gently stroked her hair.

“Hweeeh...”

She beamed, and her expression relaxed. It looked like she was in heaven.

There was a part of Leon that wished he could simply stop everything and admire her. But that feeling had much to contend with in the maelstrom of his heart.

I thought she was just like me...but I was wrong. She's more like Master and Rheina. But how? How could someone as cowardly as I am...end up like that?

In the end, Leon's question was never answered. Instead, a new one presented itself.

Was our meeting really just a coincidence?

No...it was surely the Lord's will. A sign.

But...even if it was, I cannot let her stay.

I like her. That I can't deny. That's why I need to let her go. I'm not capable of protecting anyone.

If Alice stayed by Leon's side, only tragedy awaited her.

Leon could not let that happen. But nor could he find a way to shake her off.

So for the time being...it looked like the two would be living together.

I'll do what I can to keep you from dying in that time.

And to make sure you stay safe even after you go...

Leon came to a decision. He removed his hand from Alice's head.

"Go have breakfast," he said. "We're heading into town again."

"Yes, Master," she replied. "To the guild again?"

"No. We're going to see an old friend of mine. A blacksmith."

"A blacksmith?"

"That's right. My arm requires maintenance. And we also need to order you some *custom equipment*."



To any fresh-faced adventurer, obtaining a set of custom equipment was a proud moment. And for that to come from the master she held in such high esteem...well, suffice to say Alice found herself in very high spirits indeed.

"Custom equipment ♪ that Master gave to me! ♪"

She skipped through the streets merrily. Leon glared at her sharply.

“...You seem to be missing the point here,” he said. “Listen to me. The only reason I’m doing this is that I recognize your talent and wish to nurture it. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Master!”

“I have no particular fondness for you, and this doesn’t make you my apprentice. Understand?”

“Yes, Master!”

“...Are you even listening to me?”

“Yes, Master!”

Leon sighed deeply and glanced around. Out on the streets, the people’s gazes were as cold as ever. That wouldn’t have posed a problem had Leon been alone, but Alice was with him, and despite her sunny disposition, she had attracted some icy stares as well.

At this rate, Alice won’t just have to be wary of fiends, but of her fellow man as well. This is exactly what I wanted to avoid. What’s the best way to get her to leave...?

But Leon was unable to come to any decisions on his walk, and soon the pair arrived in front of their destination: a small weapon shop with a snug little storefront. The sign out front proudly displayed the store’s name: UNBREAKABLE.

Leon entered the building and headed straight to the back, where he found a mousy-looking girl with raven hair sitting quietly on a stool behind an accounting desk, apparently tending the store.

“...Welcome,” she said.

“So quiet!!”

“You’re keeping shop today, I see,” said Leon.

“...That’s right.”

“Where’s the boss?”

“...In the back. Asleep.”

“Mind if we pay her a visit?”

“...Go ahead.”

Leon walked around the girl and through a door that led to the backyard. It was full of smithing tools and facilities, all crammed around a central kiln. It seemed the mistress had been hard at work only a few minutes before, as the air was still hot.

Sleeping on the ground in the middle of it all was an adult woman.

“Get up, Emilia. I have a job for you.”

The woman’s eyelashes softly fluttered open.

“...Oh, fuck, I’m tired...”

She sat up, her green eyes weighty.

“Got a big pile of orders that never seems to go down. That’s life, I guess. Been a real shit show these past few weeks, though.”

She scratched her head, looking up at the sky. Her long scarlet hair was dirty and unkempt. It looked—and smelled—like she hadn’t bathed in a while.

Then Emilia finally acknowledged Leon’s presence.

“So, what does a rotting ghoul want with someone missing three nights’ sleep?”

“I need my arm looked at...and I’m here to make a custom order.”

“Custom equipment? You got plenty in that arm and leg o’ yours, don’tcha?”

“Not for me. For her.”

He turned to Alice, and so did Emilia. For some reason, upon seeing the girl, she grew even grumpier.

“Who are you supposed to be?” she growled.

“U-um...pleased to meet you. My name is Alice Campbell.”

“Right. And why are you with Leon?”

“W-well, I just became his top apprentice, you see.”

“...What?”

She wasn't just grumpy anymore. She looked like she might leap up and try to kill someone at any moment.

“Leon? What the hell were you thinking?”

“...Tell me about it,” Leon muttered, turning away awkwardly. Emilia continued glaring holes through his skin for a moment, and then...

“Hmph. Whatever. It's no concern of mine. So, custom equipment for the young lady, is it? I assume you've got the goods?”

“Yeah. Here.”

Leon reached into a pouch at his waist and pulled out the Testament Stone from the ogre in Karna Village.

“Huh. Class Two, I see. Bet the young miss didn't get this herself, did she?”

Emilia turned her prickly gaze on Alice. Nothing escaped her dark green eyes. Alice couldn't even bring herself to make eye contact.

“No novice adventurer's worth deckin' out in custom equipment. It'd be like sending a mannequin into battle with silver armor.”

“It's better than sending her out with nothing,” Leon replied.

Emilia clicked her tongue, the most fed-up expression imaginable on her face. But she didn't try to reject Leon's order. Instead, she stood up and walked over to Alice.

“Scuse me.”

“Hweh?”

Without reservation, she began running her hands over the girl's body.

“Wh-what are you...?!”

“Just takin' some measurements,” Emilia replied. “An' tryin' to figure out any peculiarities. Speakin' of which, your bust is pretty small. Aren't you fifteen already? I wouldn't hold out much hope for a last-minute growth spurt, if I were you.”

“Th-that’s not...”

“By the way, that rotting ghoul over there likes women with big racks, not washboards like you.”

...Alice turned and gave Leon a look that said, “*Say it isn’t so.*” Leon ignored her.

“Hm. Well, I think I get the gist. Village girl, I assume? With pretty barren land, judging by your arm muscles. No crops, so you were brought up hunting. Good with a bow, and not bad with a knife either.”

It was all 100 percent correct. The woman, in addition to being a big-breasted harlot, must have been some kind of master detective.

“Figure I can hammer out something special in about ten days or so.”

Saying this, Emilia turned to Leon, casting an appraising eye over his prosthetics.

“How have you managed to get them so beat up already? Here, I’ll check out the arm first. Take it off.”

As instructed, Leon disconnected his right arm and handed it to Emilia. She set it down on a small desk and, pulling over a toolbox, got to work.

“Hm, hm. Needs a tune-up, like usual. You’ve been using Number Three a lot; that causes the power to drop, you know.”

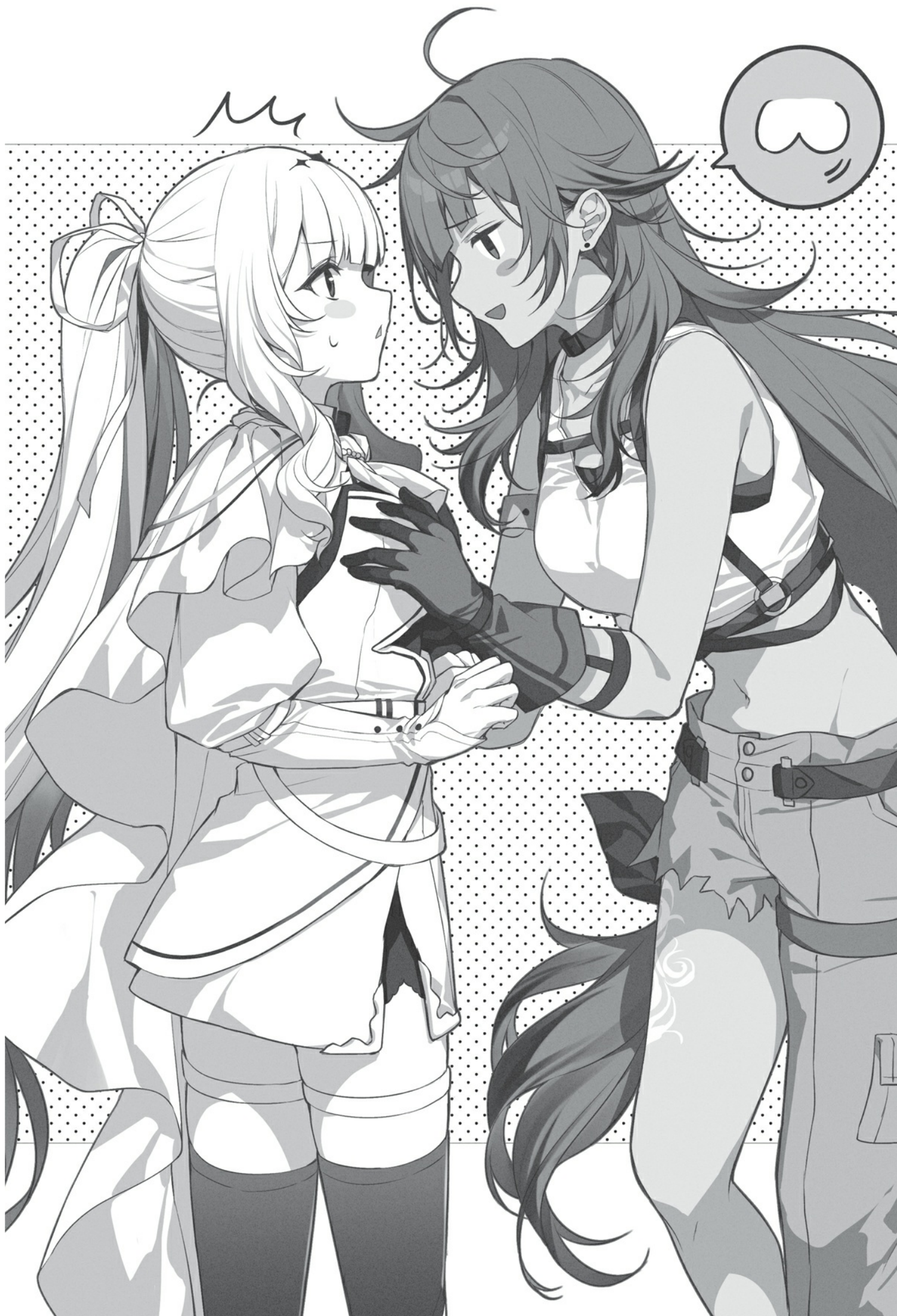
“...I didn’t notice anything.”

She sighed. “No, I bet not. I’m surprised you’re still alive, Leon.”

“It’s all thanks to you, Emilia.”

“Hah! You’re damn right it is.”

Alice found herself drawn in to their peaceful chat.



“How long have you two known each other?” she asked.

“Must be ten years, give or take,” answered Emilia.

“That’s a very long time.”

Emilia just scoffed. Alice saw in her a confident, mature woman and so couldn’t help saying what came to mind.

“I’m a little jealous, you know. You two have such a good relationship.”

“What?!”

Immediately, the look in Emilia’s green eyes darkened.

“A good relationship? You must be joking!”

It didn’t look like she was trying to hide embarrassment. Her disdain for Leon seemed the same as those exhibited by the people on the street. A bottomless hate and disgust.

“Any relationship between us is strictly business,” she explained. “Nothin’ more, nothin’ less... Oh, I guess there is one other thing...”

Here Leon interrupted her.

“I don’t think we need to tell her about that,” he said, in an oddly stiff voice. Emilia, however, disregarded him and kept going.

“There’s one other thing that ties us beyond our arrangement. You see...I’m his mistress. He has to do whatever I say. Isn’t that right, Leon?”

Leon simply gazed at the ground, silent. Emilia laughed and went on.

“I was just about to call for you, actually. Saved me some time comin’ here yourself. Once I’ve finished the young lady’s job, why don’t you and I have a little chat?”

Alice found it difficult to keep up with the conversation. Leon, on the other hand, only sighed. Emilia took this as tacit acceptance and spoke on.

“You’re familiar with the Village of the Kin-Eaters, in the western part of Lucatiel Dungeon? It’s a nice place to earn some loot without too much risk. Our mutual acquaintances have their eye on the place, which is why any

nuisances that show up need to be dealt with smoothly.”

“She’s back, then? The Orc Queen?”

“Damn right, she is. That’s where you come in. You’re the only one who can put those things down for good, Leon Crossheart.”

So far, Alice had kept her mouth shut, but when Emilia said that, she just had to ask...

“Did you say...put them down for good?”

“Sure did. As I’m sure even you know, fiends don’t stay dead for long. Maybe it takes a few days, maybe years, but they always come back eventually.”

Indeed, just as Emilia had said, fiends were, in a sense, immortal. This was the biggest reason for the darkness in people’s hearts.

“No matter how many you kill, they keep comin’ back. The fiends’ numbers are growing while humanity’s are dwindling. One day, there won’t be any of us left.”

But if Leon could kill them for good, then...

“Master can save the world!”

The reason for Alice’s elation was surely not pure pragmatism, but Emilia showed no tact, cruelly dismissing her hopes.

“Nobody’s saving the world,” she said. “In fact, that power’s the only reason he’s not dead.”

The look on her face as she nibbled her lip was not the disgust of before. No, it was the exact opposite: grief.

“Listen to me,” she said. “Sometimes strength ain’t all it’s cracked up to be. The world can have other ideas. There’s no better example of that than Leon here.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, he ain’t your knight in shinin’ armor. His job isn’t to save the world. He’s just a tool. A tool to be thrown away once he outlives his use.”

Alice didn’t understand what Emilia meant at first.

“Thrown...away?”

“Yep. Leon’s a Red-Eye. A fiend. He can’t just run around unsupervised. He’s only alive at all because his power is useful.”

Alice felt it was deeply unjust for others to dictate Leon’s life.

“But why? What did he ever do?!”

Emilia just grinned. “Have you heard of Night Walker?” she asked.

The non sequitur threw Alice for a loop. She nodded with a mixture of anger and doubt.

Night Walker was the name of an infamous serial killer. Their age, history, and even gender were all unknown. The only thing linking their crimes was that they always left a poem at the scene, written in their victim’s blood. They had 284 confirmed kills, but rumors said the true number was over a thousand.

“Four years ago we found out who he was. He was a fiend; a vampire, to be precise. Not only did that grant him superhuman physical capabilities, but the power to turn other humans into fiends as well. Of course, nobody would care if this were just some Blue-Eye. The problem was, he was a Red-Eye.”

Red-Eyes kept their minds and so possessed the same level of intelligence as a human.

“After that, people learned how dangerous a Red-Eye could be. Now they’re destroyed whenever they show up. That way, they can’t come back, you see.”

With all this new information coming at her from out of the blue, Alice wasn’t sure how to respond.

“What do you mean...they can’t come back?”

“You heard me. Red-Eyes don’t revive like other fiends. Price of keeping your human mind, I suppose. I dunno why, but it’s true.”

If killed, Leon would be dead for good. And the ones giving Leon’s orders wanted this to happen.

“B-but why?! It’s not fair! Master’s the only one of us with the power to save the world! Why would they kill him?”

“Twenty-eight thousand.”

The sudden unexplained number threw Alice off-kilter. Seeing her reaction, Emilia went on.

“That’s the latest estimate of how many new fiends appear every single day. And on the other side, we’ve only got the one. Leon.”

Faced with such a crushing reality, even Alice began to feel daunted.

“Still, that doesn’t change the fact that it’s a handy power to have. So Leon’s earned himself a stay of execution, shall we say. There’s no better assassin of fiends than him. So he has his uses...for now.”

And once he’d served his purpose, he’d be discarded. That was his fate. His punishment.

“Listen. Power’s a curse. As if bein’ turned into a Red-Eye ain’t bad enough, Leon’s got himself the power to slay immortals to boot. That’s why they won’t let him die so easily. If public opinion of Red-Eyes was like it was four years ago, maybe there’d still be a chance for him, but...”

It almost sounded like she didn’t want it to be true. Alice was sure that Emilia’s apparent disgust for Leon wasn’t the complete story, but before she could venture further, Emilia cut short her digression and returned to the topic she had been discussing earlier.

“Leon. I’m ordering you to slay the Orc Queen. As we speak, she’s producing more and more of those pig-faced bastards. She needs to be stopped. Permanently.”

In short, what she was asking was this: stride into the lair of the orcs, a fortress of Class Three fiends, and slay their beloved monarch. Alone.

“That’s suicide! You’re sending Leon to die!” protested Alice.

“Of course. Haven’t you listened to a word I’ve been saying?”

“You can’t be serious! I shan’t stand for it! I shan’t!”

The volume of Alice’s voice surprised even herself. But when her master’s life was on the line, she couldn’t just stay silent. Leon felt a little warm inside at her furious defense, but he had to stop her.

...She's probably going to demand to come with me, isn't she?

On this job, and the next. Unable to bear her master rushing into danger alone.

I can't let her. I have to nip this in the bud.

Leon made up his mind.

Alice turned to him and yelled, "You can't do this, Master! Just refuse the job!"

"*Sigh.* Haven't you been listening to me, young lady? He's the only one who *can* do it. That's the only reason he's still alive. If he refuses, he's putting his own neck on the chopping block."

That was an unassailable truth. However...

"...I might not be able to refuse, but I can ask you to alter the request."

Leon's remark took both Alice and Emilia by surprise. The former cocked her head quizzically, while the latter seemed to catch on to his intent.

"Emilia. Could you negotiate me some easier tasks, just while I'm training the girl? And could you get them to drop this request, just this once?"

Alice couldn't tell what Leon hoped to achieve by doing this. Noticing her puzzled look, the ghoul explained.

"I can't help being sent into danger. But if you continue your training..."

"...Oh! I can protect you!"

"That's right. You have potential, in mind and body both. The potential to protect the things that really matter to you. I can help you draw that potential out."

"Yes, Master! Please do!"

Her young, pretty face lit up with emotion, and she accepted the proposed compromise. She must have been over the moon at finally seeming to earn her master's trust. It was the same look of determination that the ghoul once had, when he said to his mentor and fellow apprentice...

I will—

"I shall protect you!" the girl declared.

Before he even knew what he was doing, Leon patted her on the head. Not out of love for his loyal disciple but out of pity. Pity for her and for how he himself used to be.

Emilia turned to him and said, "You do you, pal." Then, turning to Alice, she added. "Looks like we're going to be seeing a lot of each other, young lady."

She didn't exactly sound overjoyed at the prospect; even Alice could tell that.

But Alice returned home with Leon without ever figuring out how the two felt about each other.

That night, after Alice had eaten and bathed, she retired to her room. What she really wanted to do was train all through the night. She wanted to become able to protect her master as soon as possible. But Leon had convinced her otherwise.

"Sleep is a part of your training," he'd said. "Go straight to bed and don't leave it until tomorrow morning."

With those words ringing in her head, Alice leaned over and blew out her bedside candle. The fatigue from her training and satisfaction from her meal quickly drew her into slumber. The girl surrendered herself to it...**and entered the world of dream.**

"When life is hard, you need to smile the hardest."

Mother used to say that all the time.

"Smile when you're angry. Smile when you're sad. Smile when it hurts. Smile whenever you really don't want to. That's what you were born to do, Alice."

The other villagers treated her like she was mad. But to me, she was very precious. So long as she was there, I could face each new day with hope.

But one day, her eyes turned blue, and that ruined everything.

"Smile, Alice. Because soon I won't be able to..."

She was bedridden and couldn't even stand.

“Alice. You will be happy. That’s what you were born to do.

“So, smile.

“Smile, even when you can’t. Smile so that you smile.

"You have to smile. Go on. Smile."

“Smile.

"Smiles miles smiles miles smiles miles smiles miles smiles miles smiles miles smiles miles

I loved her. From the bottom of my heart.

That's why I had to make it end while she was still human.

Then...

“Aliccce...”

Mother.

“Smile, smile, smile...”

Mother...

“Smile! Noooooow!”

Mothermothermothermothermothermothermothermother.

Mothermothermothermothermothermothermothermothermother

“...aah!”

She sat up in bed.

“Haah...haah...haah...”

Her heart pumped like mad. Cold, clammy sweat clung to her skin. She hugged her trembling shoulders and took deep breaths.

“...I’ll go see him.”

She stepped out of bed and left the room. Surely one look at Master would make her feel better.

“I’m going against his instructions, but I’m sure he won’t mind...right?”

A faint smile passed her lips as she arrived outside his room. She gently opened the door so as not to wake him, and there she saw...

“...Huh?”

The room was cold and completely empty.

In a pure-white oblivion—the domain of fiends—a single gunshot rang out.

“It’s not like I thought this would be easy, but I must admit...I underestimated you.”

The path to the Village of the Kin-Eaters was hidden in a field. Not a dangerous place by most rights, but with the Shroud in place, things became very different.

“Yoyoyoyoyoyoyooooo!”

A mandrake leaped at Leon, and he fired his pistol, piercing the plant-man’s heart and turning its all-green body to rotten soup.

“...No scratches that time,” he muttered, tracing the fingers of his right hand across the wounds he had so far sustained: signs of his mistakes. Physically, he was in perfect condition, but mentally he was not. The reason for that was the girl named Alice Campbell.

“...I made the right decision,” he told himself. “I always intended to part ways with her. The sooner, the better. If I put it off for too long...there’s no telling what might happen.”

In order to protect Alice, Leon betrayed her.

After making it sound like she’d earned his trust, he’d shown with his actions that it was all a lie. And the note he left behind ought to deal the finishing blow.

“I can’t spend my time looking after a naive little girl. You, protect me? Absurd. The fact that you fell for my lie proves you’ll never be capable of that.”

After several further lines like this, the letter notified Alice of her dismissal.

“Now that girl has a future again. I made the right decision.”

Yet Leon felt nothing but regret. Why was that? It was because Leon wanted her to *save* him. To a ghoul like him, Alice Campbell was...

“No! My only saviors were Master and Rheina! The moment I killed them, I destroyed any hope of salvation!”

But every time he told himself that, another layer peeled away.

A lone wolf, a solitary savior, a corpse with no purpose but to complete his mission. These false pretenses were peeling away, and Leon was finding he could play his part no longer. The crushing loneliness. The pain of self-hatred. A man at his breaking point. That was the truth behind Leon Crossheart.

“Stop thinking about it. Just stop. It’s done now. She and I are—”

But before he could finish his thought, he heard a voice.

“No... It can’t be...”

He couldn’t believe his ears, but soon he heard the voice again. This time, there was no mistaking what it said.

“Help...me...”



“Haah...haah...haah...”

Alice Campbell ran. She ran through the white gloom, a desperate look on her face.

“Master!”

The tears welling in her eyes were not of anger, no. They were tears of fear.

“No! No, no, no, no, no!”

She couldn’t let it happen again.

She couldn’t *allow herself to be left behind* again.

“Master! You can’t do this to me again!”

She had to find him. Because he was the only one who truly—

“Tree! Tree-tree-treeEEEEEEE!”

At that moment, something came flying out of the ground. A mandrake. A creature formed from plant material, save for the eyes, nose, and mouth, which were eerily human. Though its sudden appearance took Alice by surprise, she nonetheless evaded its attack with unparalleled finesse.

“Stay out of my way!”

Springing backward, Alice reached over her shoulder and drew her bow, loosing an arrow at the foe. The projectile whistled through the air and shattered the enemy’s head. One shot, one kill. But fiends had no fear. And so...

“G...g-g-grow... G-g-g-groooooow...”

“Seed...seeeeeeeed...”

A whole horde of Mandrakes descended on Alice.

“Master!”

However, even when faced with this dire situation, Alice did not crack. She would not die. She would claim her happiness and live by the side of the man she sought.

“Rrgh!”

Alice felled the attacking mandrakes with her bow, turning each into rotting puddles of molten flesh. But the fiends did not relent, and soon the tide turned against her.

“Khh!”

Just then, an attack came from Alice’s blind spot, and the girl failed to notice the mandrake’s fist until it was too late. The crushing blow toppled her.

“U-urgh...”

Her eyes filled with tears. Was she really going to die here when there was so much still to do?

“Mas...ter...”

The words came before she summoned them.

“Help...me...”

He had ignored those words once before.

But this time...

“Why are you here?”

As soon as she heard those words, a gunshot rang out and blew the enemy away.

Leon Crossheart looked down at Alice, at her sprawled form. Her pretty white hair and delicate features looked as if they'd each been dragged through the mud, and her protective face mask dangled from one ear. Through it, he could see a large bruise on one cheek.

Seeing this, Leon was filled with an indescribable rage. Guided by his emotions, he laid waste to the rest of the fiends. Yet even that did not calm his heart. If anything, it only made the flame burn brighter. He grabbed Alice by the scruff of the neck, pulled her to her feet, and yelled...

“What the hell do you think you're doing?! Do you have a death wish?!”

Alice shrank back, and with watery eyes, she answered, “...My mother was the only one I had.”

The voice that issued from her lips seemed ready to crack.

“The other villagers killed my father after he fell sick, or so I was told. Everyone there hated us. I had no friends or allies at all.”

As she spoke, Leon's head began to cool.

“But I was happy there. As long as I had my mother, I could make it through anything. I could smile, no matter what came. But...she's not here anymore.”

Her green, misty eyes gripped Leon by the heart and refused to let go. Leon saw something vaguely familiar when he looked at her. Eyes filled with a mixture of hatred and gratitude. A maelstrom of emotion, battling it out inside.

It reminded Leon of something. A village that he once visited with Claire and Rheinhardt, back when they were still alive.

“It was you, Master. *You killed my mother.*”

He remembered her now. A young girl who looked very similar to the one before him. Could it really be?

“...My mother fell ill too. As the days went by, she gradually lost her mind to the sickness. I couldn’t bear to look at her, and so...I thought it would be better to end it. But...I couldn’t do it. Not by myself.”

Leon thought back to that remote village. To the events that unfolded there.

A giant, cackling fiend, and an innocent child about to fall into its clutches.

Leon showed up in the nick of time and slew the beast, but when he took the girl in his arms, she neither smiled nor cried. All she said was, “*Mother...*”

“It was you who reached out to us, Master, when no one else would. That’s why you’re a hero to me. You’re all I have left in the world. So, please...”

Tears streaming, lips trembling, the young girl reached out her arms and extended a heartfelt plea.

“...don’t just throw me away!”

Leon couldn’t even move.

He recalled how after the event, he’d left the poor girl with an orphanage at a nearby town and then forgotten about her completely. There was only one way to deal with orphaned children, and that was to put them in an institution designed to take them in. Once it was over, Leon could forget about her. Out of sight, out of mind. Remembering her would only bring heartache.

Faced with just one of the many things he had chosen to forget, Leon thought.

She sees the world in simple shades, like all who live in emptiness. Like me. She’s lived with nothing, as I did, and she sees me as her salvation, just as I saw Master and Rheina as mine.

Finally, he accepted it. Leon couldn’t make her go away at all. She was the

same as him. He, too, had decided that the only place for him was by Claire and Rheinhardt's side, and he wouldn't take no for an answer.

Leon and Alice understood each other. Leon was Alice's salvation, and she was his.

"I..."

Before he knew it, he was speaking.

"I won't protect you. I can't."

"That's okay. As long as I can stay by your side."

"I...I betrayed your trust."

"That's okay. I can take any betrayal so long as I'm with you."

He could fight it no longer. And in his heart, Leon felt a trace of relief. He reached out to take her hand.

Four years of hell. Four years of solitude. And the one salvation that could wash it all away... But at the very last second, he stopped. For if there was one thing more powerful than Leon's hope, it was his despair.

He turned his back, and in a weak voice, he spoke. He couldn't make the choice, so he selected an option that wasn't there. To neither accept his fate nor deny it.

"...If you want to follow me, go right ahead. I won't stop you."

Then, dragging his left leg behind him, he set off. The girl caught up and walked alongside him.



"Erm, Master? Can I ask you a question?"

"...What is it?"

"What kind of person is Emilia?"

"...Looking for dirt, are you? A little leverage to hold over her?"

"I don't like the way she treats you," Alice retorted. "I want to save you from

her.”

Her eyes were fierce. Leon ignored them.

“You’ve made two wrong assumptions,” he said. “First, Emilia may have influence among my superiors, but it’s not enough to simply dictate what I do.”

In addition to being one of the best blacksmiths of the day, Emilia belonged to a shadowy organization known as the Neighbors of Fear. Her role within that organization was to keep an eye on Leon and report his behavior to church authorities, as well as deliver his missions to him. Her power beyond that was quite lacking.

“She might be able to negotiate me some easier jobs, but that’s about it.”

“H-huh? I thought you lied about that...”

“It was a lie, yes. That doesn’t mean she couldn’t do it.”

Emilia was such a genius that people said she was living centuries ahead of everyone else. Given her importance, it wouldn’t be impossible for her to vouch on Leon’s behalf.

“Th-then she can—!”

“That brings us to your second wrong assumption. The truth is, Emilia initially offered to do precisely that. I refused.”

“...What?”

Alice had assumed it was Emilia’s doing, giving Leon terrible jobs just to torment him. She was mistaken.

“Emilia is not my enemy. In fact, she’s the only one on my side.”

Alice was finally starting to see the truth. Leon watched her furrow her brow for a moment, and then ask another question.

“So you asked for that awful job?”

“That’s correct.”

“But why? Why would you do something like that?! Are you trying to get yourself killed?!”

“Because our interests were aligned. The church got their value out of me, while I was able to hone myself against a powerful foe.”

That was all Leon was good for now. Killing monsters.

“In the goblin lair, you told me I was strong... In terms of my ability to dish out violence, that’s certainly true. My prosthetics see to that. But in terms of my mental strength, I still have a long way to go.”

Leon stood still and stared at his palm. Now, even in the depths of the most perilous dungeon, his fingers didn’t tremble. That proved just how far he had come.

“I’m far from perfect,” he said. “Sometimes I get into a fight and I don’t know how it’ll end. It...”

It scared him. He needed more courage. He needed to forge his weak heart into something no monster could daunt, just like those two had. Otherwise...

“...I can never keep my promise to him.”

Alice didn’t know what he meant by that. She couldn’t even imagine. But she did know one thing for sure: Leon Crossheart was on the path to self-destruction, and he walked it gladly.

The church, the people, the world. Even if all their hate went away, it couldn’t save him now. Because the one person who truly hated Leon—who wanted to see him die more than anyone else—was himself.

“If you want to keep me alive, then you’re welcome to try. But unless you can change my mind, it’s a fool’s errand.”

Leon knew that would never happen. He had given up all hope of it long ago.

“...I won’t let you die,” Alice reiterated, a determined frown on her pretty features. “I swear on my life.”

Leon sighed, dismissing the feelings growing within his heart.

His promise was ironclad. He could never break it for her. Never.

Once more, a silence fell between them. An awkward silence that felt like

knives sticking into Leon's skin.

Alice, meanwhile, decided to change tactics. Rather than focus on a vague, unknowable future, she had chosen to align herself to the task at hand. This was evidenced by the next question to come out of her mouth.

"Do you think this job is possible?" she asked.

The Village of the Kin-Eaters was a writhing hub of Class Three monsters. Was it even feasible to just waltz right in and slay the Orc Queen that led them?

"A front-on assault will almost certainly fail," Leon answered. "We'll have to use stealth. If we can get close enough to the target without being seen, we can win. If we're spotted..."

Then there would be nothing to do but pray for a swift death.

"There's no glory if we succeed. And if we fail, only a miserable end awaits you. Do you still want to come along?"

"Yes."

Alice didn't hesitate. Yet there was unease in her eyes.

She clearly wants to run, but something inside her is stronger than the fear. I should order her back to town...but I doubt she'd listen.

...As long as I don't screw up, she'll be fine. In fact, her being there should make good motivation to get the job done properly.

The power of the heart made people stronger. Rheinhardt had once said as much. Leon was a monster, but he had a human heart. Surely Alice's presence would be a positive influence overall.

With that on Leon's mind, they soon arrived at the entrance to their destination.

"Stay low as we proceed. Don't make a sound. If you have to speak, do so quietly. Understand?"

"Yes, Master."

Crouching down, Leon advanced, his ears searching. The buildings were all close together, so there was no shortage of hiding spots. Plus, there was

something else contributing to the pair's stealth.

Namely, the sounds of combat.

"Heeereeeeetiiiiiccc!"

"Deeeeemooooooooon!"

Werewolves. The canine creatures were feuding with the orcs, the two sides turning each other into puddles of rotting meat.

Leon stole a look at Alice. She looked a little perturbed by what she was seeing. Luckily, with all the noise the monsters were making, Leon could safely explain without fear of being heard.

"Monsters usually avoid harming each other, but the ones living here are exceptions. Like all monsters, they're governed by the emotions and traumas they experienced in life. In the case of these, that's a deep enmity."

Before it became home to monstrosities, the settlement here was known as Oracle Village. It was an ordinary little hamlet, with nothing much to say about it, until its secret came to light.

"Oracle Village was made up of worshipers of a pagan faith. The church doesn't recognize pagans as humans, so they can be sentenced to death without trial."

When the church discovered the heresy, they sent a squadron of temple knights to the village, but as soon as the purge began, a cloak of white darkness descended over the settlement. The villagers were transformed into unsightly pigs, while the knights became savage wolves.

In all likelihood, they didn't even realize. They didn't notice themselves turning into monsters; all they felt was hatred for each other. That was what drove them on, even after losing their humanity.

"...But they never had it to begin with. It wasn't the mist that turned these people into monsters."

They tore at each other's flesh, gnawed at each other's bones. Devoured each other. The cycle of violence would continue on forever. They were beyond salvation now.

“...Let’s move on.”

Alongside his apprentice, Leon advanced toward the center of the village. Slowly, carefully, hidden amid the buildings. As Leon had predicted, it was a fairly simple matter to approach the Orc Queen’s lair, the Nursery of Filth, undetected.

“I sure hope everything goes this smoothly,” whispered Alice.

“It’ll all change once we enter the Nursery,” said Leon, not slowing down as he talked. “The orcs will have prepared a defense there.”

What happened next came out of nowhere. As Leon made his way between the buildings, he passed a pagan church. And the moment he did, **a foreign memory invaded his brain.**

Happiness is born of love. That was my guiding philosophy.

“Your belly’s really started to grow recently.”

My husband smiled like an innocent child. It brought me immeasurable joy to think that part of that man was growing inside me.

“When I first met you,” he said, “I didn’t think this day would really come.”

My thoughts were the same. After all, he was a strict and holy knight, while I was a humble nun. We were both pledged to the Goddess, sworn to live our lives in Her service.

“I suppose we didn’t know what love was back then.”

“No,” I agreed. “We were so ignorant.”

No one was more devoted to our Lady than we, and we were rewarded with positions that befitted our piety... But one day, I noticed the hole in my heart.

We loved the Goddess. But She did not love us back.

It wasn’t enough to shake my faith, but a part of me always seemed to be missing.

Until I met him. He had been feeling the same way, and we chose to fill the holes in each other’s hearts.

"I'm really glad I married you," I said.

"Me too. It was truly our Lady's will that we met."

We smiled, stroking my swollen belly and praying for the new life I was bringing into the world.

But that ungrateful bitch of a goddess betrayed me. Betrayed the love I offered her.

"How...? Why?"

I never became a mother. According to our faith, it was because my soul was wicked and corrupt, unable to bear a child safely into the world.

"Ortesia..."

There was no trace of love in my husband's eyes.

"...how could you betray me like this?"

I lost everything that day. My happiness. My love. My child.

...And my right to live as a human.

The influx of memories suddenly stopped, and Leon's mind returned.

"...Those were most likely the memories of the Orc Queen," he said.

This was the true identity of the endlessly birthing fiend. A woman who lost her unborn child, and with it, everything.

"Yet another fiend with an unusual fate."

But that was why Leon was here.

"...Let's go. It's time to put an end to her tragic tale."

With determination shining in his crimson eyes, Leon led Alice through the village. After walking for a while, their surroundings began to change.

"Are those...egg tubes?" asked Alice.

"Yeah. This is where things get serious."

The two stared at a building completely entwined in a white, tubelike

structure.

“That’s where the Orc Queen births her offspring... Like that.”

From the tip of the serpentine tract came a squelching sound as it ejected a dark red egg.

“Wh-why, it already looks quite vile just from appearances, doesn’t it?”

Alice winced in displeasure. The egg began pulsating, but just as it seemed about to hatch, bringing another new life into the world...a horde of werewolves descended on it. With their sharp claws, they tore the egg, and the hatchling within, to pieces.

“Th-th-th-that’s...! Thaaat’s...!”

That’s what you deserve, they tried to say. Just then...

“Piggyyyyyyyyyy!”

A piercing shriek echoed over the area. It belonged to the queen. A scream of anger and grief for another life cruelly destroyed. As if synchronized to her pain, an army of orcs suddenly appeared out of nowhere and started fighting the werewolves.

“Her obsession with children could be a weakness...”

However, Leon was not going to have the chance to exploit that weakness. Because the job here was a simple assassination. All Leon needed to do was find a location to take the shot, and his victory would be assured.

“I know I’ve said it before, but this is where things get serious. The scales are tipped heavily in the orcs’ favor here. If you get spotted, it’ll be over. Try not to make a sound.”

Leon first dropped to the floor, placing his left ear to the cobbles. His superhuman hearing picked up footsteps, which his brain analyzed to draw a complete map of the surrounding area in his mind—how many fiends, their locations, how they were moving. Then it calculated the shortest distance to his destination.

He turned to Alice and signaled with his eyes and hands.

“No speaking from here on out. Understand?”

“Yes, Master!”

The pair set off again, Leon leading the way via the complex route he traced in his mind. As a result, they encountered no opposition at all.

“We’ll pass through this building and leave by the back door,” Leon signaled. *“From there, we just have to get onto the rooftops.”*

“You’re amazing, Master! You make it seem so easy!”

It was a tightrope act, but Leon had made it through unscathed. A little relief mixed in with his continued vigilance, he entered the building.

“M-Master,” Alice signed. *“Wh-what is this place?”*

“A brothel, obviously. Is that a problem?”

Alice immediately went red-faced, clearly flustered.

“B-b-b-but that’s lewd!”

“...You need to train yourself to be numb to it. Adventurers can’t go losing their minds over this.”

“Wh-wh-what kind of training are you suggesting?!”

The gentle back-and-forth relaxed Leon’s mind, and just as he noticed his guard was down—just as he passed one of the rooms—a **new memory began to play.**

When I was a woman of the cloth, I hated purveyors of corruption and vice. They had turned against our Goddess and deserved the stones people threw at them.

It was only when I was put in their shoes that I finally understood. It was us, throwing the stones, who were the sinners. The purveyors of corruption and vice had been denied the privileged life I led.

But that realization came far too late.

“Now, squeal! Squeal for me, you little pig!”

I did what the customer wanted. Even though it made me feel sick to my core.

“Oink! O-oink!”

“Hahahaha! Music to my ears! Sounds just like the real thing!”

The man cackled as he violated me from behind, like a pig.

“Always wondered what a nun feels like! Who’s your savior now, bitch?”

He struck me on my cheeks, slamming his crotch into my behind.

...What a pathetic, wretched thing I’d become. I wanted to die, but I was too ashamed to go through with it. I was born to be happy, so why was I living this tragedy?

I couldn’t accept it. And I couldn’t let it end without doing something about it.

To die without dignity, reduced to a pig... I couldn’t let that happen.

I needed to live happy. To die happy.

And for that...

“Give me...a child... Please... Please...”

I begged. Not for the customer, but for myself.

I wanted a child. A child is the embodiment of love. And love is what makes people happy. I wanted to be happy. So I wanted a child. I wanted a baby.

...The other prostitutes used to look at me with pity.

“A child won’t make you happy, you know.”

“Besides, they won’t let you stay pregnant for long. They’ll take you out back and sort you out.”

They all wanted love too, like me. But whenever they found it, it was taken away.

Soon enough, that happened to me as well. I finally conceived, only for my happiness to be killed once again.

I wasn’t allowed to give birth.

“...What good is this?”

I tore it apart, staring at the thick, crimson fluid that flowed out of it.

I thought back to my time as a nun. Already my memories were fading, replaced by a pitch-dark sentiment as black as night.

“The village, the people. The Goddess and all Her creations...”

It all needs to DIE!

Another sound overlapped the woman’s voice. This one, however, came from the real world.

“...!”

Leon sensed danger and snapped back to reality. Right before his eyes, the wall of the brothel caved in, and several orcs entered. They turned to see Leon and...

“Oink!”

Squealing, they all rushed him at once.

“Tch!”

It was too sudden, too unexpected, too dangerous.

“We’ll fight them here! Prepare yourself!”

“Y-yes, Master!”

Alice took a step back and drew her bow. Leon stood before her, defensively, staring down the orc band.

...Then the battle began.

Thinking fast, Alice distracted the mob, and Leon charged in like a mad beast. The fight only lasted a few moments, and soon all the monsters lay dead.

“...How did they know we were here?”

Leon didn’t have an answer. He and Alice had remained completely silent. While he pondered how the orcs could have detected them...there was another crash from behind them as a second group of orcs broke in.

“...Grh! Get outside! Quickly!”

Alice and Leon left via the hole made by the first group. But what awaited them on the other side was...

“Oink, oink, oink!”

An entire orc army stampeding toward them.

“Impossible...!”

Nobody had raised the alarm. How did the orcs know exactly where they were? There was nothing wrong with Leon’s navigation, either. There should have been zero chance of the pair being spotted. And yet...

“M-Master! Your orders?!”

“...Rgh!”

Her question came like a scream, pulling Leon back to the battle. There was no time. The hows and the whys could wait until later. Right now, the question was...how would Leon and Alice get out of this alive?

The only thing for it was...

“Pull back!”

As he and Alice fled, Leon focused on his hearing, searching for a weak point in the blockade...but only failure waited at every turn.

Nothing about the situation made any sense. None of the orcs had called for reinforcements. And yet even faraway allies had come to the rescue.

Looking closer, Leon noticed that all their eyes were vacant...*as though something were controlling them.*

“It can’t be...!”

A memory occurred. Four years ago, during the massacre at Yugosland. Leon had seen the same thing there.

Back when the monsters all had empty eyes and moved according to *his* whims.

“Could it be? Is he here as well...?”

Leon was being pursued. Hunted. But though he was sure of it, he couldn't sense the perpetrator anywhere. Soon, he and Alice were forced back out into the streets. He couldn't explain why, but it felt like he was being guided somewhere. To the queen.

The village square in the center of town was her throne. Was she happy now, protecting dozens upon dozens of her own precious dark-red eggs? Was this everything she wanted; when she worked at that dingy brothel, when she was a woman of the cloth? Before she was transformed into this enormous aberration?

Her form dominated the square. Hundreds of dangling teats, spilling endless quantities of milk, and ten limbs, like an insect. But those limbs possessed a second function—reproduction. They were covered in female genitalia, and the monarch's serving-orcs huddled around her, thrusting into the holes.

The semen flowed into her, implanting their seeds, while the eggs exited her body via the tubes that sprouted from her back.

Were those eggs the symbols of love she sought?

“M...my baaaabiiiiies...”

The queen released a perverse sigh as she shifted her gaze to the two intruders. As she spotted them, her azure eyes grew fiery with indignation.

“This is exactly what I wanted to avoid,” Leon muttered. His face, by contrast, showed no emotion at all. But on the inside, he was afraid. His trembling arms attested to that.

“I—I don't want to die! Not in a place like this!”

Alice, on the other hand, was shaking all over and made no attempt to hide her fear. Yet her eyes shone with boundless courage and a determination to return alive at all costs.

“Oink! Oink, oink!”

One by one, the orcs paused their breeding and turned to the pair.

“...We need to take out the queen before they overwhelm us. That’s the only way we’re getting out of this alive.”

Most of the orcs were her offspring. Kill the mother, and they would die with her. The question was how to go about that.

“The queen thinks of her babies above all else. That means she’ll focus on anyone trying to destroy the eggs, and since her thoughts are transmitted to the orcs, it means they will, too.”

After a moment’s indecision, Leon handed his gun to Alice.

“Use this to shoot the eggs. While you distract her, I’ll prepare the finishing blow.”

Alice was to take on the role of decoy and bear the brunt of the orcs’ attention. It was not an easy decision for Leon to make. If this plan worked, both of them would escape with their lives. But if it failed, it wasn’t hard to imagine what punishment the angered monarch would bring down on whoever attempted to defile her precious eggs. No doubt Alice had considered the possibility as well. And yet...

“All right, Master! Leave it to me!”

She answered without hesitation. The light in her eyes was the same as Claire’s and Rheinhardt’s, back when they were still around.

I trust you. Absolutely.

Four years ago, Leon had betrayed that trust. But not this time.

It won’t happen again. The old, weak me is dead, and today, I’ll prove it!

The fires of resolution ignited Leon’s eyes. The next moment...

“Oooooiink!”

The orcs attacked from every direction. A truly despairing number. Alice felt her heart might give out at any moment, but...

“I shall see it done, Master!”

Her arms and legs quivered. Her face was streaked with tears. Yet Alice

stepped bravely forward. She pressed on, took up the gun...and fired between a gap in her foes. Her bullet struck one of the liver-red eggs directly, ending the life of one of the Orc Queen's beloved babies before it had even begun.

"Oooooooooink!"

All of her aggression centered on Alice, and every living thing in the square turned to face the girl. Her life was in her own hands now. With that in mind, Leon got to work.

"Recievest ye my hammer, that thy sins may be absolved and truth restored to the world."

He recited the scriptures, calming his heart. The plan he was about to execute would demand his fullest concentration, and so he excised all idle thoughts from his mind—including those of his disciple and the heartless end she was about to meet.

"Come, scale-bearer, and weighest thou my heart. On the right lieth faith. On the left lieth humanity. Virtue lieth in their balancing, and in their imparity lieth corruption. When the holy fire cometh, blessed be those it consumes."

Alice fought bravely, not stopping for a moment. It was like a miracle; as if her talents reached their fullest potential on the border of between life and death. Everywhere she looked, there were orcs coming for her, but each of their attempts ended in failure. She flitted in between their attacks with grace and dexterity, all without neglecting her duty to destroy the eggs.

She was at the same time a beautiful butterfly and a vicious bee. But she was human, and only a novice adventurer at that. There were limits to what she could achieve.

"Haah...haah...haah..."

Her breaths grew ragged. Sweat dripped down her face like bullets. There was no way out. It was no longer a question of if she would die but when.

But Leon had erased her existence from his mind. It wasn't because he didn't care about her—it was because he did. To save her, he had to forget about her.

Then, he lifted his mechanical arm and pointed it ahead. He lifted his

mechanical leg and placed it firmly on the ground. All his crimson eyes perceived were the monsters he needed to kill. With his heart purged of impurities, he began to speak.

“Let grief be my guide. Strike of Velclast. The Almighty’s light. The black dragon’s roar.”

In concert with his clear timbres, Leon’s mechanical arm and leg began to glimmer. Then, they began splitting and merging, like a hive of insects, recombining into the form of an enormous cannon.

“Arts of Steel, Deploy. Abominable Armament Number One: The Unsoiled Martyr’s Glory, *All For One*.”

This was Leon’s supreme technique. The first of the Abominable Armaments and an ultimate killing move. When his mechanical arm and leg combined, they emitted a radiant, golden light.

“Let thy sins be cleansed in holy fire, and be thee guided into the bosom of the Lord. *lä cthul shtagn*. Let it be so.”

With the verse’s closing words, Leon fired. A beam of golden light shot from the barrel; a ruinous fire that, while it could smite any foe, also caused untold damage to the person who launched it.

Leon’s custom prosthetics were made possible by Emilia’s genius and were supposedly the ultimate conceivable tactical weapons. Their power was unparalleled, but they provided no protection at all for their wielder.

For example, Abominable Armament Number One generated a tremendous amount of heat, which dissipated throughout the wielder’s body and roasted their flesh. Not only that, but the shockwave produced by the supersonic projectile inflicted bone-shattering amounts of pressure that crushed the bearer’s organs.

That was why no living man could use this weapon. Only an abomination with superhuman regenerative capabilities could wield it. Hence, Emilia dubbed them the Abominable Armaments and gave them to Leon.

Now.

When the beam of light dissipated, the Orc Queen's piglike face...was utterly obliterated.

"Y-you did it, Master!"

Around Alice lay several dead orcs. Not only had she survived a fearsome pack of Class Three monsters, but she had even managed to take out about half of them.

"You're the one who deserves praise, not me. Well done. I mean it."

But Leon could see that she, like him, was severely wounded. If he had been a second later, or if anything unexpected had occurred, the two of them might not have made it out alive.

The old me would have died today. Shaking in my boots, unable to summon up even the slightest drop of courage. I'd die, cursing my life and my past that led me here.

But that didn't happen. I've grown. I feel closer now. To my master and to my fellow disciple. Perhaps now...I'm ready to face him.

Pushing aside his emotion, Leon felt around in his waist pouch. The activation of *All For One* had drained him of Source, and as it was, he was finding it difficult to even stand. He needed to replenish, but killing the Orc Queen would soon turn all of her subjects into rotting meat puddles. With no way to devour their flesh, Leon was left with little choice but to rely on this.

He produced a small leather sack, at one end of which was a sharp hypodermic needle. Inside the sack was monster blood, which Leon could inject into his own. Leon jabbed the needle into his right femoral artery, letting the contents enter his bloodstream. His Source power thus slightly restored, Leon found himself able to stand upright again.

"...At least now I can make it back to town," he muttered.

Leon took a few deep breaths and turned to face the dead. But just as he was about to offer his usual parting words, he noticed something deeply unsettling.

"They...haven't liquefied?"

All dead monsters turned into fetid puddles. And yet, those littering the floor,

even the headless queen, were still very much solid. This could only mean one thing...

“W...w-w-we...weeeeeee!”

It was not over yet. From out of the headless queen’s lifeless neck sprouted dozens of...*things*. They were tiny pig’s heads. They squealed, squirming, and grew their own necks.

When Leon saw it, he realized at once what was really going on.

“The Orc Queen...she wasn’t just a single being!”

The wretched nun who fell from grace—she was only one of many. One of many brothel workers who sought love, only to have it taken from her again and again. That was the true nature of the monster known as the Orc Queen.

“Oink! Oink, oink!”

“Ba...ba-ba-baby...”

“W...w-w-weeeee!”

All the heads spoke in different voices, but they all wanted the same thing: the eradication of those two intruders who stood before them.

“Rgh! Run!”

But it was already too late. Alice was completely surrounded.

“Uhh...”

She emitted a tiny squeak as the orcs tore off the clothes covering her dainty figure. They didn’t want to kill her. Instead, they tossed her to the ground, crowded around her, and revealed their swollen members, as if presenting them to the girl.

“Rgh...!”

They were each as thick as a man’s arm, hard as boulders, and throbbing right under her nose. Alice could only watch, her teeth chattering with fright, as they brought those brutal instruments closer.

Leon saw the predicament his apprentice was in—but he couldn’t move a

muscle.

“Khh!”

Several more of the orcs held Leon down and pinned him to the ground. He was forced—forced to watch his precious disciple be raped and destroyed before his very eyes before being tortured to death himself.

That was what the Orc Queen wanted, and so that was what her loyal subjects wanted too.

“How did it come to this...?”

It took all his strength to muster those words—words that concealed a burning rage toward his own failures.

The orcs possessed superhuman strength. No ordinary person could wrest themselves from their grasp. However, Leon was far from ordinary. With his remaining energy, he could fling the orcs aside and rescue Alice. He had the power, but...

“Move...! Move...! Move...!”

It was no use. Try as he might, he couldn’t focus the strength. He could only quake in fear.

Why?

Because he would die. If Leon tried to save her, he would lose his life in the process. And thus, he found himself unable to act.

“What am I doing? What’s wrong with me?!”

His body. His mind. Both were ruled by fear. He knew what he had to do. He had to save her. He had to sacrifice himself. He needed to. There was no other way.

Yet Leon could only watch, terrified.

It was just like that day.

That day, four years ago.

What was I talking about? I haven't learned a thing.

These four years—these four, hellish years.

That day, that moment, when everything was taken from me.

It hasn't taught me anything at all.

Just as Leon's mind began to fade into oblivion and despair, he heard a noise.

"Oink... Oink."

An order from the Orc Queen. *Do it.* The orcs surrounding Alice began to move. One of them grabbed her slender arms and held her fast, while another spread her legs.

"Uhh... Urhh!"

Her wide eyes were wet with tears. The orc pressed with his erect genital and began rubbing it against her, as if detailing what was about to happen.

But even then, Leon could do nothing but watch in terror.

"M-Master..."

With a frightened yelp, Alice turned and locked eyes with Leon. If those eyes were filled with disdain, with disappointment at her useless mentor, then Leon would have understood. But they weren't. Her bright green eyes showed no malice whatsoever.

"Please...run away!"

Here, at the very end, the only thing Alice felt was love. Unconditional love for her teacher, and thoughts only of his safety, no matter at what cost that came to herself.

Those feelings. That look.

"Rheina...!"

They were the same as his. The man Leon betrayed. The man Leon failed.

"Ugh...grgh...!"

Leon couldn't stop the emotions flowing out of him. But nor could he bring himself to exert command over his fear.

"Oooooiiiink!"

As if in ridicule, the Orc Queen squealed. A prelude to the young girl's tragedy and the beastmen's debauchery.

"Stop...!"

In just moments, Alice would be defiled before his very eyes, and it would be all his fault, because he couldn't be there for her when she needed him most.

"Stop it...!"

The moment seemed to stretch on forever. Amid a silent world, Leon considered the weight of his sin.

Dammit. Dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit.

In the end, I never became who I wanted to be. I'm not a protector or a savior. I couldn't even keep my promise to him. I'm just... I'm just...

"That's right. You're an idiot. A big, stupid idiot."

All of a sudden, a voice rang in Leon's mind.

"There is a way out of this dilemma, and that is not to let despair rule you but to fight against it.

"If there's even a glimmer of humanity in you, Leon, then there are no limits. Let your mind transcend your mortal flesh and lead you to victory.

"...Isn't that what I taught you all those years ago?"

That voice. The voice that so clearly pointed out his flaws.

"Leon. You aren't my helpless young disciple any longer. You're my child. And as such, you have a responsibility to uphold. You know what it is. Deep in your heart, you understand what you have to do. Don't let your worthless self-hate define you; say it. What do you want to do for your dear apprentice? For Alice?"

Slowly, Leon felt his power return. The voice inside his head banished all of Leon's fears and showed him the way.

"I want to protect her! Even if she doesn't want me to! Even if I don't think it's possible! I...I have to save her!!"

His mind turned blinding white. Before he knew what he was doing, his right arm dropped to his hip—and to the hilt of his holy sword.

"I'll let you off this once," the voice said. "But some things never change. No matter what happens, you'll always be my troublesome little student."

Leon thought of the voice, strict yet loving, and of the woman in his life who once bore it.

Then...Leon Crossheart yelled.

"Hark, ye fiends! Fear my might!"

Those words were the same his master spoke whenever she unsheathed the sword.

And, as fate would have it, on that occasion, the hilt in his hand moved.

It was just a peek. Just enough for the blade to get a glimpse of the outside world.

Yet its black-and-gold edge removed from this world all who had fallen into sin.

There was a flash. The light of divine power. It blinded the eyes, but just for an instant, and when it cleared, the only ones remaining were Leon, Alice, and the queen's head. All the orcs and the eggs had vanished, obliterated by the majestic light of Leon's holy blade.

"Agh... Aaahhh..."

She was melting. The queen's head, a congealed mass of countless smaller heads, was melting.

From her blue eyes came bitter tears.

"Aahhh...aaahhh..."

At the very end, only one of the heads remained. Leon stood up and, without

saying anything, walked over to her. He picked up the gun that had fallen to the ground...

“My...baaabiiiiies...”

...and put a bullet right through her brain.

You aren't the only one who wants to protect their child, he thought. I do too. And for that, you need to die.

There was no apology. Instead, a prayer. For a soul ascending to heaven.

“May your rest be eternal salvation.”

After those solemn words, Leon removed his coat and turned to Alice.

“This should do for now.”

He handed it to her, keeping his face turned away. Alice cheerfully put it on, then asked...

“It's over now...isn't it.”

“...Yeah. For good this time.”

Then Leon looked down at the sword at his hip.

“That voice... There's no mistaking it. It was...”

But Leon's introspection was broken by none other than the voice of his disciple.

“Erm...Master? Do you think...we could get going?”

It was no surprise she didn't want to linger any more than she needed to. It was possible the orcs' violence had already traumatized her. Thus, Leon placed his thoughts aside for the moment. Even he was surprised at how quickly he put the girl's needs above his own.

“Can you stand?” He asked.

“I-I'm not sure I can. I'm sorry...”

“I see. In that case, I'll carry you.”



Leon turned his back and crouched down. At first, Alice seemed reluctant, but soon she placed her arms around Leon's neck and let him lift her off the ground.

The ghoul began to walk, dragging his left leg behind him and carrying his immobilized apprentice.

"W-wow! Just look at that!"

It seemed the holy sword had truly purged the village of monsters.

All that remained of them were their Testament Stones, shining brightly.

"You're wonderful, Master! I can't believe you slew all these monsters in one go!"

"It wasn't me," Leon replied. "It was the sword. It's not a power I can call upon whenever I like."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. The sword's power is finite. Every time I use it, it loses strength. Eventually, it'll just be an ordinary lump of sharpened metal. For it to restore its powers, it needs to be kept in the sheath."

"It's not like the sacred weapons I've heard about in stories at all. But look." Alice motioned at the sight unfolding before her eyes. "Look at what it made for us. It's as though they're lighting our way."

Those stones were a testament to the lives of the humans their bearers once were. Now the sight of them all glittering in unison was really something to behold. Alice gazed at it wistfully before saying...

"I was nothing but a burden once again, wasn't I, Master?"

"Not at all. If you hadn't been there, I would have died."

Leon couldn't believe how gentle, how mild, his voice sounded. Perhaps Alice noticed it too, for she smiled and added. "I won't hold you back next time. I promise. You'll see; I'll be the one protecting you."

It was the same thing she swore in Emilia's workshop. However, this time, Leon felt the warmth within those words. It entered his body, melting his heart.

"I trust you," he said. And this time, it wasn't a lie. "I'll teach you everything I

know. And until you grow strong enough to protect me, I'll..."

Leon paused. Try as he might, he couldn't say what was in his heart. The voice inside his head told him, *You aren't good enough.*

I want to protect her...but I can't.

The chains of Leon's past bound him, forbade him. So while Leon knew how he felt about her, he couldn't say it out loud.

"Master? Is something the matter?"

"...No, it's nothing," said Leon, shaking his head and bottling up the words he really wanted to say. "I'm looking forward to seeing great things from you. Maybe even greater than myself, *Alice.*"

Leon forced himself to say something bland and inoffensive. To himself, at least. But for whatever reason, Alice jumped when she heard those words.

"M-M-M-M-M-M-Master?! D-d-d-d-d-did you just...?!"

"...Hm? Did I say something wrong?"

"N-no, not...not really. Did you not even notice?"

"Notice what? I don't sense any enemies around."

"Not that either!" she shouted, her clear and beautiful voice quite agitated now. "You just called me by my name for the first time ever!"

"...Did I?"

"Yes, you did! That's the first time you've called me anything other than 'her' and 'the girl'! I was really upset about it!"

"Oh."

"But now...ehehe...you said my name..."

She seemed extremely happy and a bit more forward than usual.

"Er...um! Do you think...you could...say my name again?!"

Leon suddenly got the feeling that if he granted her request, the pair's relationship would be headed in a very intimate direction. The reason was obvious: for Leon, refusing to say Alice's name had been his last line of defense.

Beyond that point, he could no longer pretend she was just a mere acquaintance. That was why, even just subconsciously, he had avoided using it. He couldn't allow himself to make friends if he wasn't capable of protecting them. It was his penance, and he couldn't just ignore that.

However...

Even if he was incapable, he had a duty to uphold. A duty to make her happy.

"...Alice."

Leon shook off his self-loathing and spoke her name, just as she requested.

"Ehe...! Ehehehehehe...!"

Alice looked shy as she laughed adorably. Hearing her voice, Leon could barely contain himself. And so...

"O-one more! One more time, please!"

"Alice."

"Oh! Hooh-hooh-hooh! A-again, please!"

"Alice."

"Oho! Ho-ho-hooh! ...Again!"

"Alice."

Each time he fulfilled her request, Leon thought.

I was the one who took this girl's mother from her. Even if it was to save her, that's an incontrovertible truth. Which means...I must step into that role. I need to be there for her daughter instead of her. I need to make her daughter happy in her place.

And so, this was not something Leon was doing for himself.

With that excuse resounding in his mind, he continued.

"Alice."

"Oo-hoo-hoo-hoo...!"

And for that girl, he swore a silent vow.

He would not betray her, as he had done.

He would grant her everything she desired.

And he would never make her upset again.

...Until the time came to fulfil his promise.



“Hmmm, he’s completely forgotten, hasn’t he?”

High above the clouds, in a pure-white world where even starlight failed to reach, ■■■ looked down upon the pair. He unfurled his glorious white wings, lording over his heavenly domain.

“What love could be so strong it makes you forget your *archnemesis*? ...Haha, I’m a little jealous.”

■■■ narrowed his *violet eyes* and reminisced. He never used to believe in fate until now. Now he could see the two were bound to each other.

“What a coincidence. Both times, you almost noticed me.”

Karna Village was only a test of his own power. A way to see how much had returned. And the experiment here, at the Village of the Kin-Eaters, proved it. He was ready. And who should turn up at that exact moment but *him*.

It was the perfect opportunity to settle who was stronger, ■■■ or Leon? And the answer was precisely what he had been expecting.

“What have you been doing these past four years? Oh, you haven’t changed at all. But that’s okay. That means there’s still a reason to kill you. You’re still the same shameless coward you’ve always been.”

His lips curled up into a grin. A twisted smile upon a cherubic face.

“My *old wounds* have completely healed. Nothing stands in my way now.”

He looked down at the man carrying his disciple upon his back. At Leon Crossheart.

And his cheeks reddened as he declared, in the spirit of a lover placing a curse upon their beau,

“I want to see it again. Your face as you’re dragged down to the very pits of hell.”

The Corpse's Relief, the Girl's Smile...and the Angel's Descent

I was complete.

That girl granted me what my heart had been missing.

Something I thought I would never have again.

Her smile was so precious, so radiant, that...

I wanted those days to go on forever.

However, I should have known...

Fate would never allow that to happen.

Normally, after breakfast, Alice had a short break before heading to the basement to train. The day after a job, however, was a rest day.

But that didn't mean that the girl was able to roll around in bed doing nothing. A day spent idle was anathema to the mind and body, or so Leon said.

And so Alice was spending her day off cleaning the mansion.

"Mas-ter's room! ♪ Mas-ter's room! ♪"

She swung open the door and waltzed right into her teacher's private space. It was shockingly barren, furnished with only a small round table and a bed. Alice quickly got to work. She began by sweeping away the dust from the floor. Then she scrubbed down the little table. Finally, she moved to the bed.

"What's this?"

Alice picked up a photograph near the pillow. It depicted the Hero of Salvation and her disciples. A young boy smiled, lifting the corners of Leon's mouth with his fingers. Rheinhardt. He possessed a beauty that seemed to

transcend gender, with delicate features and long, silver hair that fell about his waist. In the photo, Leon gloomily scowled back at the boy, and standing off to one side, arms folded, was a pretty, smiling woman. This was Claire, the previous Hero of Salvation and Leon's master. She was tall for a woman, with burning red eyes and hair.

She was the very model of womanly charm, but one thing in particular drew Alice's envious eye most of all.

"Y-you can tell the size even under those loose-fitting clothes! There's no doubt about it—this woman is the source of Leon's fondness for boobs!"

Claire Redheart was a formidable woman in more ways than one. Two more ways, in fact.

"Mmmrgh! W-well, *mine* will be as big as that one day! Just wait and see! Hmph!"

Time to double the milk intake, Alice thought. And a little breast massage couldn't hurt, either.

"...Still, why does she look so familiar all of a sudden...?"

Alice had never noticed it before, but now that she studied the picture in detail, she couldn't help but feel that Claire reminded her of someone. But who? Alice pondered it for a minute, until a clinking noise broke her concentration. She turned to the source of the sound to see Leon's sword, resting against the wall.

"Hmm, what was its name again? Calit Gelius?"

For a moment, Alice scrutinized it where it was stored in its jet-black scabbard.

"Is it...talking to me?"

Alice didn't know why she thought that, but she began walking over, as though it were drawing her in.

"What am I doing? I can't touch Master's things without asking..."

Alice knew it was rude. She knew she shouldn't be doing it, but for some reason, she just had to touch the sword, to pick it up in her hands.

"It feels...like my mother is here, stroking my head..."

She couldn't explain why she felt that way. At that moment, she snapped out of her trance when she heard her Master's voice.

"It's chosen you, then. That sword."

Alice squealed and turned around.

"M-Master! I'm sorry!"

"Sorry? What for?"

"F-for touching your things without asking..."

"I don't mind. There's nothing here you're not allowed to touch."

It sounded curt, but Alice could tell there was kindness in his words.

"...It seems that you have what it takes to be the next Hero of Salvation."

"Huh?"

"The sword chooses its bearer. If it deems a person unworthy, it won't even let them touch it."

Leon ran his eyes over the sword, then looked at Alice.

"...Do you want to try?"

"Huh? T-try what?"

"Try to see if the sword will let you draw it."

"N-no, no, no! I'm sure it won't!"

If Leon couldn't draw it, there was no way Alice could, she thought. But just then, she heard a voice in her mind.

"Try it."

A voice like a kind old lady to her grandchild. That was what it sounded like to Alice. She felt a sensation difficult to put into words as she gripped the hilt and focused.

Then.

"Ah."

The sword drew so smoothly, she let out a cry of surprise. Soon the blade was free.

“Wow...it’s so pretty...”

It was devilishly enchanting, so much so that even a total weapon novice like Alice was taken by it. The blade, decorated in black and gold, seemed like it could snatch away the very souls of those it slew.

“I see,” said Leon, deep in contemplation. “Meeting you was no coincidence.”

His voice snapped Alice out of her trance, and she realized how disrespectful her behavior was, showing up her master by unsheathing the sword he failed to draw.

“I...er... Th-this must be some kind of mistake!”

“There’s no mistake. The holy sword is never wrong. Calit Gelius has chosen you.”

His gentle crimson eyes were filled with emotion.

“I can rest easy knowing that you will continue on after me.”

Alice felt a little worried by his words. They sounded like those of an old man on his deathbed, bequeathing his legacy to a favored son. Pure and sweet and yet deeply melancholic.

“Master...?”

What thoughts moved beyond those crimson eyes? Leon did not answer. Instead, he closed his eyes softly and began to speak.

“Back when Rheina and Master still lived, I was obsessed with the sword. I always wanted to catch up to them, to be accepted as one of them, and I thought to do that, I had to be able to draw the sword. However, I never could... No matter how hard I worked, it refused to recognize me... I was so unreasonably angry. But now...” Leon gently placed his hand atop Alice’s head. “...I feel nothing. Despite how easily you succeeded where I failed, I feel no jealousy at all. If you can do it, then that means I don’t need to.”

Alice couldn’t help but feel it again. Like Leon was speaking as if he might go away at any moment.

“...I don’t think this answer is the one the sword wanted to hear.”

Those final words from Leon’s lips, whispered so softly, her ears almost failed to catch them, made her realize at last what the sword was after. It had allowed Alice to draw it free of its sheath, not because it accepted her, but because it was trying to tell Leon something.

Like a master showing their pupil the right way.

But even though Leon knew that, he couldn’t do what the sword wanted.

There was a long silence before Leon said, “It’s almost time for lunch. Let’s eat, then head into town.”

“We’re going out? Where to?”

“To the blacksmith.”

Alice’s heart leaped in her chest.

“We need to go pick up your custom equipment, Alice.”



“...Humanity should just perish.”

At the forge connected with Unbreakable, the weapon shop, one woman lay sprawled on the floor, muttering maledictions under her breath. Her eyes looked like those of a dead fish.

“Just when I thought I could finally get a good night’s sleep, man, fuck this and fuck all those bullshitters who wouldn’t recognize good craftsmanship if it bit them in the fucking ass. Fuck their deadlines; fuck them just going ahead with shit without asking me. Are they trying to fucking kill me? Is that what they want? They want me to fucking die? Well, fuck them. They should all fucking die, those fucking pigs. I swear to God...”

Anyone could see she was about one tactless comment away from burning down the entire building and everyone in it. Still, Leon walked right up to her without reservation.

“Emilia,” he said. “Get up. We’ve come for our special order.”

“...Huuuuurghhhhh...” Emilia let out a sigh that made it sound like she was going to deflate. “...It’s right over there. Take it and get the fuck out of my sight.”

She pointed to a bow resting on the worktop. It was ivory white, inlaid with scarlet bands. Alice eagerly shuffled over to it and picked it up, excitedly looking it over before asking, “Erm...why does the grip part have blades coming out?”

“Hurghhhh... Hold it in both hands and try channeling Source energy into it.”

Emilia offered no further elucidation. Alice gave a puzzled look, then did as the forge mistress suggested. When she did, the bowstring dissolved, the grip split apart, and the weapon became two curved swords.

“Now you can fight at both close and long range with the same weapon,” Emilia explained. “By channeling Source into the scimitars, you can make them sharp enough to cut through steel, and in bow mode, you can summon phantom arrows that pack a real punch...That’s it for the main features. Figure the rest out yourself. Now go away.”

Her explanation complete, Emilia heaved another big sigh and rolled back onto her side. The girl almost looked like a corpse, but Alice’s attention was gripped by the weapon in her hands.

“This is really wonderfully made, Master! It almost seems to stick to my hands!”

“That’s Emilia for you. Best blacksmith in the land.”

Emilia prickled a little as Leon sang her praises. “...Heh,” she scoffed. “Well, even the best weapon in the land’s no good in the hands of an incompetent girl like you.”

“Hey! I might be new, but I am not incompetent!”

“Hah. Well, only time’ll tell if you live up to your words or die like the rest of ‘em.”

Emilia turned toward Alice and appraised her.

“...Wonder why it was you and not me,” she muttered so quietly, it was almost impossible to hear her. Then, in a louder voice, she declared, “Well,

whatever. I'll leave the task to you, then. *The task of saving Leon*, that is."

Emilia's words raised a cluster of questions in Alice's mind, but before she could voice any of them, the fiery forge mistress went on.

"Do you know the name 'Regtelia Town'?"

"Isn't that...where the Martyrs are from?"

"Yes. That psycho cult with their own interpretations of the holy texts. They set up a place they could impose all their masochistic rules. Anyway, a few days ago, the Shroud got 'em."

In other words, mankind lost another settlement while a new dungeon arose.

"As you know, newly created dungeons are a bit of a mystery. We don't know what's goin' on in there, but the place is sure to be teemin' with anomalies. Perfect if you want to go questin' for gold and fame."

Anomalies. These items had been touched by the general weirdness of the dungeon, and some of it had rubbed off on them.

"Anomalies are unique items, only created when a dungeon springs into existence," Emilia explained. "That means the more we let glory-seeking blowhards loot the place, the less there'll be for us."

That said, few were foolhardy enough to go wandering into an unexplored dungeon, even with such massive sums of money at stake. Everyone from the most debt-laden wastrel to the most cloud-headed optimist knew to stay well away from such a dangerous place.

Yet there was one breed of person who tossed aside common sense and reveled in acts of sheer suicidal madness. Yes, heroes.

"The Risky Eagles. I assume you've heard of them?"

Leon nodded. One person in particular came to mind. A scar-ridden man by the name of Velgo Zahaj. The man they called the Hawk and an old acquaintance. The Risky Eagles were led by none other than him.

"As usual, they went into the place first. And they picked up a hefty haul, too. Problem is, Velgo's the only one who made it back alive."

“...What?” said Leon. For once, it seemed he was actually concerned. “Is he okay?”

“It was touch-and-go for a while, they say, but he’s recovering now.”

“...Thought so. That guy’s impossible to kill.”

Despite Leon’s cold words, it wasn’t hard to see the genuine relief on his face. Emilia nodded in agreement before continuing.

“Anyway, like I said, Velgo brought something back with him. It seemed like fruit of some kind, but...it was a fuckin’ weird shape. Anyway, when they took it down to the lab to have it examined...”

Here, Emilia paused, looking to Leon and Alice in turn.

As if to imply the story was only just getting started.

And sure enough, the next words out of her mouth blew any relief Leon might have been feeling about the safety of his acquaintance right out of the water.

“...They found out it could cure Blue-Eye and turn fiends back into people. All with just one little bite.”

Leon and Alice went wide-eyed with shock. They could barely move, let alone speak.

“Yeah, that was basically how I reacted as well. It’s like there’s finally a light at the end of the tunnel.”

If the anomalous fruit could be analyzed, perhaps it could lead to a medicine or vaccine against Blue-Eye. It would mark mankind’s conquest over the disease that had brought it to its knees. Perhaps there was even a way to defend against the Shroud, to stop the mist from taking away people’s homes. And...if fiends could be turned back into people, then...

“...Do you think...we could turn Master back into a human as well?” asked Alice.

Emilia was the first to answer. “Maybe, but there’s somethin’ more pressing at stake. Leon, you know what I’m gettin’ at, don’t you?”

The ghoul was silent, staring at the ground.

“...My promise. This could be another way...”

The past must remain fixed. But the future was under no such obligation.

“...Could I...keep some of that fruit? Even just one?”

“Yep. I already made ‘em promise. You just gotta get it.”

Alice could no longer follow the conversation. She was an outsider, with no right to intrude upon their past. But that was okay. The three of them were still of one mind. They all wanted to fight for a brighter future. Alice, Emilia, and even Leon. And so...

“Will you take this job, Leon?”

When her master nodded, Alice said nothing to stop him.



“Your job this time is collecting the anomalies and also information.”

“...Information?”

“Yeah. You see, the church sent in another team before you. Highly trained specialists, the lot of them, but they went dark. If all went well, they’d be back by now, and there’s been no contact, either. The higher-ups are assumin’ they’ve all been wiped out.”

“So now they’re sending me?”

“You got it. The primary objective is to gather more of these fruits. Your secondary objective is to find out what you can about the enemy. If you can bring some samples back, great. If not, then let us know where to find ‘em.”

Emilia continued to brief Leon for some time. Although he was expected to return alive, there would be no support or reinforcements from the church. The scouting party that got wiped out consisted of the organization’s most highly skilled warriors. The church was wary of sending any more valuable personnel into the meat grinder. Save Leon, of course.

“So they can’t spare any more reserves?” Leon asked.

“Fraid not. Even I couldn’t wrangle you any backup this time,” said Emilia.

Alice smiled at the woman's pained look. "You really do look out for him, don't you?" she said.

"...Shut up."

Emilia turned away, acting aloof. Her silence spoke volumes.

They way she'd spoken and acted when Alice first met her had been born of despair. She wanted to help Leon, but she knew she lacked the strength to do so. Thus, she had given up and resigned herself to awaiting the day he failed to return.

Still, there was no mistaking her drive to help Leon in whatever way she could. And perhaps she'd have her opportunity this time. Thus, she cautioned Leon carefully.

"Listen to me, Leon. Don't get yourself killed out there. Even if you can't bring back any of the fruits, I'll get my hands on one somehow. You just gather what info you can and come back, understand? ...With that pretty little lady of yours, too."

A few days' carriage ride later, Leon and Alice arrived at their destination.

"So this is Regtelia Town..."

As the pure-white darkness parted, the town's front gates came into view. Alice gulped. This was her third time ever in a dungeon, and she still wasn't used to the heavy atmosphere.

Plus, this was a brand-new dungeon, and little was known about it. Who knew what kinds of fearsome fiends roamed within or where the coveted fruits could be found? And just how strong were the enemies in this place? There were too many questions, and there was nothing for it but to get to work and start feeling around.

It was terrifying. Alice feared this place from the bottom of her heart. But just then...

"It'll be okay."

She felt her master's hand on her head and his calming voice in her ear.

“It’s us. We’ll be okay.”

These were no mere platitudes; Leon was being honest. Alice felt pride and courage welling up inside her.

“Absolutely!” she said. “When we’re together, nothing can get in our way!”

A cheerful voice and expression. Even Leon found the warmth infectious.

Truly, it was the Lord’s will that I met her. God has seen fit to grant this foolish ghoul a second chance.

If Leon could find one of the fruits, that could mean salvation. Not for Leon, but for *him*.

I thought the only salvation for him was death. But now I can bring him back. It’s a choice I never knew was there.

He had to obtain a fruit at any cost. And any fiends that stood in his way would perish at the hands of him and his formidable disciple.

“Let’s go, Alice.”

“Yes, Master!”

The two stepped boldly forward into unknown lands, where the scent of death wafted, ever present. Naturally, the two moved slowly, with Leon always listening for foes so that he could get the drop on them. There seemed to be no enemies or people around at all.

“I guess the elite team really did get wiped out...,” he said, glancing at Alice. She was cautiously eyeing her surroundings as well, casting a wary gaze into every shadowy corner. “Are you curious about those buildings?” he asked.

“Y-yes. I haven’t been dungeon delving that long, so I’m not sure what to expect...but are they usually all white like that?”

The buildings in the previous dungeons had usually been covered in blood and gore, so it was understandably hard to tell.

“I believe the look of a dungeon is dictated by the types of people who lived there before,” Leon explained. “For example, Regtelia Town was the seat of the Martyrs, a cult with their own interpretation of the teachings of the Church of

Cthul, as well as the writings of St. August. They tried to live in strict adherence to what they saw as the will of the Lord and held pure devotion above all else.”

“I see. So that’s why everything is white now.”

“Probably, yes. The Martyrs used to fly white flags as a symbol of their faith, so the color was certainly important to them. They’d love what the place looks like now, I imagine.”

If they hadn’t all been reduced to mindless fiends, of course.

“The thing is, the more you try to impose a sense of purity on people, the more corrupt you become. All that regulation turned into oppression, and that clouded the hearts of the people. That’s a big factor that leads to the birth of fiends.”

Just then, as Leon and Alice were starting to wonder what form those fiends would take, a living example presented itself. Three, in fact, shrouded by fog just a little down the road. They were a species of werewolf known as Black Fangs. In contrast to their brown-furred brethren, these examples sported fur as black as night and one other very important difference: their eyes. Or rather, their complete lack thereof.

“They wanted to be pure so badly, they altered the very definition to make themselves fit. They failed to see the corruption in their hearts, so now they can’t see anything at all.”

Perhaps they were even happier now. They’d never have to see how dark they’d truly become.

“...Alice. Take them out. It’ll make the perfect chance to test your new weapon.”

“Just leave it to me, Master.”

Alice lifted the bow from her back, pointed it, and summoned up her Source energy. Immediately, a white arrow appeared in her hand, automatically attaching itself to the crimson bowstring. She pulled it tight and then, after a few seconds, released it, felling one of the three fiends without even a sound.

A perfect shot. But what’s truly impressive is her mental fortitude. When it’s

time to fight, she completely erases her fear and goes into a trance. It's courage unlike anything I've seen. We're both cowards, she and I, but that's the crucial difference.

What was the reason? Why could she do it and he could not?

Leon could not find an answer in the few short moments it took Alice to dispatch the rest of the pack.

"This bow is amazing, Master! It's like a part of my body!"

"It's your skill we have to thank, Alice. A weapon is only as good as whoever wields it."

"O-oh, I...I guess you're right. Ehehehe..."

The way she reacted to a compliment was very charming. Leon couldn't help but feel like an old man talking to his granddaughter.

"Let's keep moving, Alice."

"Yes, Master!"

Leon advanced into the heart of the darkness with his disciple at his side. Then, soon, they came upon a strange sight.

"Wh-what's that, Master?"

"I can't tell if the scouting party did this or the fiends. Either way, stay away from it."

In the center of the road, a black flame rose out of the ground.

"It's a Sacrament, so whoever cast it should still be nearby," said Leon. "The effects don't last very long. However, I can't hear any trace of whoever might be responsible. In which case, I think it's safe to assume it was a fiend."

But what kind of fiend was capable of this? Leon didn't know. He gazed into the jet-black flames, ruminating. And just then, as he consulted his memories, **another one came out of the darkness to join them.**

My whole life, I just went wherever the road took me.

I lacked the faith the others had. Lacked the hate the others had.

I was afraid. Afraid to make a decision. Afraid to stand up for something.

But that didn't mean there was nothing I wanted to protect.

"Eek!"

A wretched squeal emanated from the dingy church cellar. From my own wretched lips.

"Get your filthy hands...off him!"

My companion Elise Zwelg stepped forward, taking the blade that was meant for me. She had stunning blond hair and an impressive shield. Her thick steel deflected the assailant's knife, and then...

"Raagh!"

She swung her great sword with a powerful yell. With the last of the foes dealt with, she turned to me.

"Phew! Glad that's over."

Another of my companions wiped the sweat from his brow and replaced his great sword on his back. Isaac Sturlson. My friend, my mentor, my blood brother. He offered me a hand as I lay sprawled on the floor.

"Can you stand, partner?"

I accepted his help and rose to my feet. Isaac smiled as he patted the dust from my shoulders.

"Seriously, friend. You have the luck of the devil himself."

Elise grinned in agreement. "If you hadn't fallen when you did, you'd be dead."

"Sure wish the Lord looked out for me as he seems to do for you. Ah, well."

...If I was really as blessed as Isaac seemed to think, then my life should have gone a lot better than it did. I knew the pair of them were trying to cheer me up, but I couldn't avoid hearing poison in their words all the same.

“...I’m sorry,” I said. “I’ve only been weighing you down.”

“There you go again. Why can’t you have a little confidence in yourself?”

“I keep telling you, Lab. The only reason you’re here with us now is that we trust you.”

“That’s right! Otherwise, we’d get them to send us someone else instead!”

The two smiled at each other, then Isaac clapped me on the shoulder.

“We need you, pal. Your Sacrament that lets you see the future, your blasted good luck, and your calm mind that neither of us possess. We’re a team; remember that.”

...Despite his words, I couldn’t allow myself to let go of the unease I felt. My Sacrament was automatic and outside my control. And who knew when my good luck would run out? Plus, I wouldn’t have said I had a calm mind. It was more like I was just a coward.

I wasn’t qualified to fight alongside them, to be an Agent like them.

“...The only reason I have this job is that my father was a temple knight,” I said with a sigh.

The other two shrugged. “Whatever. If you’re going to talk yourself into a rut, we can at least do it over lunch,” said Isaac.

“Yeah, I’m starving. Let’s head back and give our report, then get changed and head out into town. We’ll listen to you complain as much as you want there. Deal?”

I nodded awkwardly and made to leave the cellar...but I immediately slipped on the blood-slicked floor and fell.

“What was that, vengeance from beyond?” I muttered.

I sat up and rubbed my head before looking around. Taking it all in again, it was a horrifying scene. Sliced corpses littered the ground, and the stench of death was everywhere.

When I thought about how we had done this, I began to feel sick, even though it was nothing out of the ordinary for us.

“...Why do we have to kill, do you think?”

“Because it’s our job,” replied Isaac. “Our mission, our duty, our pride... I know what you mean, though. It is a little off-putting.”

“Exterminating darkness and corruption for the sake of a pure world,” pondered Elise. “To a Martyr, I suppose that’s an obvious good.”

Those we had slain were heretics. Blots of darkness upon our pure world that could not be suffered to exist. When I was young, it believed it blindly, but now it just felt cruel.

“What we’re doing isn’t so different from heresy, is it?” I said.

“Isn’t that exactly why we’re saving money? So we can make a fresh start in a more orthodox town?” said Elise, walking over to the stairs leading out of the cellar. “Let’s just do the job and get paid. It might not be glamorous, but you can’t say we’re not making the world a better place.”

No, I couldn’t. Heretics were determined to change society through violent means. The ones in this cellar had been plotting something atrocious, and if we hadn’t stopped them, they might have hurt people I knew.

“We’re saving our fellow man. Isn’t that motivation enough?”

I nodded and thought about my good neighbors. Lady Oralle at the White Cloud Inn; she treated me like her own grandchild and gave me fried potatoes even when I didn’t ask. Villonser, who ran the old bookshop on South Street; he was a great guy, and we had similar interests. There was Arize from the tool shop, Morcus the street performer, and Coral the merchant. By our acts today, we had saved them all. We could be proud of what we’d done.

Still, it wasn’t meant to last forever. We planned to leave town one day and find somewhere we fit in. Isaac, Elise, and me. The three of us, together.

“Right, well then. Let’s get out of here.”

“Quite. The smell is driving me nuts.”

The pair of them headed up the stairs, and after a moment, I followed. Elise and Isaac. The woman I fell in love with and my loyal friend. I watched them walk ahead of me, and I thought maybe someday, I wouldn’t be a burden.

Maybe someday I could protect them, like they protected me now.

As the memory ended, Leon heaved a deep sigh.

“Why can’t things ever be easy?”

Leon returned his gaze to the black fire, still burning.

“I know what’s terrorizing Regtelia Town,” he said. “An Agent. Or something that used to be one, anyway.”

“An Agent?” inquired Alice.

“Of the church,” Leon replied. “Assassins, basically.”

“A-assassins?!”

“Yes. The Agents are the peacemakers of a secret organization within the church, called the Neighbors of Fear. They’re charged with rooting out heresy wherever they go.”

Although their tenets differed, the hierarchies of the Martyrs and the orthodox church were very similar. The same shadowy organization existed in both branches.

“However, Agents of the main branch are rarely sent out on missions. Orthodox religion is quite accepting of differing creeds and doesn’t tend to brand them as heresy. The Martyrs, on the other hand, are the precise opposite. They’re always searching for corruption, always busy rooting it out.”

Because of this, the Martyrs’ Agents were highly trained in the arts of assassination and devoted themselves to honing their skills. If one of them became a fiend, Leon and Alice would find it difficult to take it down.

“However, in this case, the man in question is insecure. The memory I saw just now painted a very sorry picture, and it wasn’t of a trained and devoted killer, that’s for sure.”

If anything, the man called “Lab” was a coward, an idealist, a burden to his teammates... Just like Leon had been all those years ago.

“Do you think the memories you just saw could have been of a different

fiend?" asked Alice.

"...I'm not sure."

When a memory was as clear as the one Leon just faced, it usually meant the resulting fiend was more powerful. Judging by his past encounters, it could even mean a Class Two.

"But a single Class Two or even a Class One fiend couldn't overpower Velgo's elite squad."

"Then...do you think it could be a Special Class fiend?!"

"No. Not based upon the memories I saw."

Something stank.

"...Ever since the goblin attack, things have been going...unusually."

Unfortunately, they had little choice but to press on. Surely the mystery at the heart of it all would soon become clear. The most important thing right now was...

"What was he burning here?"

Perhaps understanding that could lead to a breakthrough regarding the fiend's weakness. A million possibilities flew through Leon's mind.

"...Hm. There's something shining inside it. Is that a Testament Stone?"

That implied the fire had been used to burn a fiend to death.

"But fiends don't kill each other without good reason. Does he hate the other fiends for some reason, or is he just territorial?"

Leon looked over at a restaurant near the fire. The board out front identified it as the White Cloud Inn, the very same eatery mentioned in the vision.

"That's where those three went to have lunch," he said.

Could he have been protecting this place?

Just then, something happened.

"U...urgh..."

Leon heard a faint voice, almost imperceptible.

“Alice. There’s a survivor. Let’s go and help.”

“Oh! Yes, Master!”

The pair headed over and came across the source of the voice. It was a female adventurer, lying by the side of the road. Her shoulders rose and fell as she gasped for breath.

“A-are you oka—?” Alice began.

“Wait,” said Leon, holding out an arm. “Don’t approach.” He turned to the woman and scrutinized her suspiciously. “Something’s not right about her. She might look human, but...”

“You think she might be about to turn into a fiend?”

“It’s possible. We need to make sure. Be ready to fight at a moment’s notice.”

Having said this, Leon took a few careful steps toward the woman and called out, “You there. Did the church send you?”

The woman slowly turned...then gasped and covered her right eye. There was only one reason she would do that.

“She’s infected,” said Leon. “With Blue-Eye.”

This was the source of the strange feeling Leon had sensed earlier.

“Alice, you wait there. Don’t let her touch you, or you could get it too.”

Then Leon quickly approached the woman, calling out, “I was sent by the church, like you... Can you talk?”

“...Water,” the woman replied.

“That I can grant. Here.”

“Oh...!”

With trembling hands, the woman accepted Leon’s canteen and took several deep swigs. While she was distracted, Leon took the opportunity to look at something specific: her eye. In her haste to quench her thirst, she had neglected to keep it concealed, exactly as Leon had hoped she would.

“You seem to have contracted it recently,” he said.

The woman jumped. “You...aren’t...afraid?”

“My name is Leon Crossheart. Leon the Devourer. Heard of me?”

“Devour...er...? ...Yes... That explains...it...”

Leon waited a moment for the woman to catch her breath, and then began his interrogation.

“Are you a member of the search team?”

“...Yes, I was.”

“Anyone else still around?”

The woman silently shook her head.

“I see... What happened? Be specific.”

The woman recounted her tale. For the first few hours, everything was going swimmingly. She and the other four on her team were all veteran adventurers, each the equal of ten lesser men. No ordinary dungeon should have posed a challenge.

“We were to investigate every lead, leave no stone unturned. The church wanted for information, as we didn’t know where the fruit could be found. However...it must have been about seven hours in, I suppose. We came to the plaza on the east side of town, and there we found an enormous tree...”

“And that was where you found the anomalies?” Leon asked.

“Yes, exactly. We thought it would take us days, not hours. All we had to do was pick the fruit and go home... But then, *he* arrived.”

A fiend. One which even the adventurers’ combined might could not fell.

“An Ifrit,” the woman said.

Ifrits were giants, clad in fire. They were Class One fiends, a highly threatening foe but not invincible.

“And not only you, but Velgo’s Risky Eagles also fell to this beast?”

“Yes. That was no ordinary Ifrit. I have slain many in the past, and I would sooner face them all at once than battle that fiend again.”

Then this fiend defied even a Class One categorization.

“I should have fled when the rest of us fell. But...I was stubborn. My sister, you see. The infection feeds on her. I thought if I retrieved a sample, I might use it to cure her...”

The woman looked straight into Leon’s crimson eyes, her pale face wretched with desperation.

As well as an adventurer, Leon was the Hero of Salvation. A warrior charged with meting out peace and justice. There was only one thing to do in a situation like this.

“I want to observe the Ifrit,” he said. “It may be possible to defeat it.”

It wasn’t too late to save her. However, Leon couldn’t make any promises.

“I don’t intend to abandon you or your sister,” he said. “But if I decide it’s too much...”

“Yes. We’ll head back to the city. I understand.”

It wasn’t hard to imagine what fate awaited her and her sister there. Leon wanted to avoid that at all costs, but if he had to retreat, he would. This woman wasn’t the only one with something to protect.

Leon turned to Alice and waved her over. Then he helped the woman to her feet.

“Do you have any idea as to the Ifrit’s location?” he asked.

“Yes, I do. One moment, please.”

The woman took out a pocket watch from her waist pouch and checked the time.

“I’ve been watching how it behaves these past few days. Over the course of the day, it travels between seven separate locations. It keeps a tight schedule, too. Around now, it should be...below the big tree.”

Leon listened to her directions, then prepared to set off. But before that...

“Oh, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Huh? Oh...you’re right.”

The woman seemed hesitant to answer. Leon suspected she might have her reasons.

“You don’t have to tell me your real name if you don’t want to. Just something to call you.”

“I see. In that case...Rayne. Call me Rayne.”

Following her directions, the trio arrived at the destination: a huge tree in the center of an open plaza. Just like the town buildings, the tree’s bark was as white as snow. Only the things growing on it were black as darkest night. They were the very anomalies in question; a peculiar fruit shaped like a downward-pointing triangle.

“As much as I want to bring one of these back right now...”

Leon suspected the fiend standing right next to it would have something to say about that.

An Ifrit. A white-skinned giant clad in black flames...or perhaps *roasted by black flames* was more accurate. On its face was a mixture of sadness and pain, as if tortured by its very existence.

“There’s no trace of what he looked like while alive. It’s quite the transformation.”

The cowardly deadweight. The one Leon compared to himself was now a fiend like him also.

“The flames, the skin color, the face. None of it is normal. Plus...”

No other Ifrit wielded the armaments this one had: an enormous sword and shield.

“He’s constructed them out of fire... Perhaps to be like his old comrades.”

What had he been thinking at the moment of his death? Just as Leon pondered that question, **the answer came to him in a vision.**

The warmth we felt.

The promises we made.

My worsening regrets.

They're all still here.

Like dregs, even after I...

"Haah...haah...!"

We ran, even though it felt like my feet would come off. We hurried down the main road in the black of night, our enemy drawing closer by the second.

"Argh, damn, my feet are killing me!"

"I don't...wanna...hear it...! Now...you've got...me complaining!"

Isaac and Elise. They were coated in blood, running for their lives.

As was I. The events leading us to this predicament replayed in my mind over and over again.

It was all because we tried to do the right thing.

An Agent's tasks were not just to kill. We were also supposed to burn any heretical texts we came across. We were engaging in these duties like any other day, when, by chance, we found it: a nefarious plot penned by Macbeth, the Archbishop of Regtelia Town and its surrounding parishes.

It spoke of danger. The whole town would meet with ruin, and those we knew to be good people would perish. We needed to evacuate the town before it was too late.

And the result of that was this. We could never hope to stand up to such a deep and malicious evil. All we could do was run. But where to? Nowhere was safe. Yet we had little choice.

"We...can't...die...! Not...here...!"

"Yeah... You got it...partner!"

"We...have...a dream!"

As we ran, we spoke of our hopes, praying for a miracle.

...But none came.

At that moment, I was struck with a vision. My Sacrament, which offered me unsolicited views of the future. It showed the impossible choice I would have to make mere seconds from now.

I watched as a dark hole appeared to the side of Isaac, and an arrow flew out at him.

My mind immediately began racing. I needed to take the hit to save him. But...what would happen to me if I did? There was little doubt; I would surely die.

My life or the life of my friend?

Perhaps if I had possessed the courage to make that choice, things would have been different, but in the end, I was unable to do anything but watch. Watch as my prediction came true before my very eyes.

“Guh?!”

The arrow pierced his back. He collapsed, and Elise and I stopped and turned.

And then another dark hole appeared above him.

I had to do something. I had to save him.

But I couldn't.

“Rgh...!”

All I could do was watch as Elise ran back for him. All I could do was shake, unable to take a single step. All I could do was listen to my friend's dying voice.

“H-help...me... Partner...”

Still, I could not move. When I finally took a step, it was far too late. The arrow ended my friend's life, and Elise dropped to her knees. Before we could recover, our foe caught up to us, and we were captured.

...A short while later, he came. The venerable Archbishop Macbeth. Perhaps it was just to see us tied up. He stroked his long white beard and furrowed his wrinkled brow.

“I thought I said to capture them all alive?”

“Yes, sire... However, one of them was exceedingly troublesome, and so...”

Macbeth gave a deploring sigh.

“This is not enough,” he said, appearing to lose interest in us. His shoulders slumped, and he turned to leave. The man, his minion, called after him.

“What should I do with these two?”

Macbeth did not break stride to answer. “Teach them a lesson... Spare them no reprieve.”

And then, our seven days of torture began. All of Macbeth’s crimes were pinned on us. We were painted as monsters and punished.

The Martyrs had a ceremony they used to deal with agents of corruption like us. To ensure that our hearts would be blackened, and we would end up in hell. They would hand us over to the beasts. A people living in the levels beneath the city. They looked human, but their hearts were anything but.

For seven days, they treated Elise and I like their playthings.

And afterward, our day of execution arrived.

We were dragged out into the town square in the center of Regtelia Town.

“A fitting end for ungrateful villains like you.”

“Serves you right, ya bastards!”

The crowd slung insults and stones. Among them, the very same innocents we had fought to protect. I was tied to a post and left to await my fate. I averted my gaze from the horrible ends of my beloved friends below me.

Isaac’s body had been left in the street to rot. The townspeople had been free to defile it as they saw fit, tearing his clothes and flesh.

And Elise...

“Ah... Ugh... Ahhh...”

She was broken. Completely broken. Such was the treatment we had received at the hands of those who lived beneath. Her pretty blonde hair had

been torn out. Half of her teeth were missing, pulled for the enjoyment of our captors. Her basic human dignity had been sullied. And then, she was fed to ravenous wolves while still alive.

“Why...?”

It was agonizing to even speak. But I had to.

Why had this happened? Why had God chosen this for us? And why...hadn't I done something when I had the choice?

“We shall now commence the burning of the villain Labresca Vidyasson.”

The speaker cast his torch onto the pile of kindling at my feet, and the pyre swiftly became a roaring blaze. The pain I felt as the flesh melted off my bones was nothing compared to the pain in my heart. My last, dying sentiment was...

“Isaac...”

If I had sacrificed myself back then, Isaac would still be alive. The two of them would have been able to escape. They would have saved the town, and lived happily in my stead.

That was the fate I should have chosen. I was a coward. I shied from virtue at the last moment, and for that, I hated myself. That was the moment everything fell apart.

“I was wrong... I was wrong...”

The tears fell from my eyes as I voiced my final sentiments.

Back then, it should have been me.

It should have been me that died, and not him.

The memory ended. A few seconds passed. Leon clenched his fists with a heavy heart.

“It's like looking in a mirror,” he muttered.

It should have been me. It was the same thing Leon had been thinking for the

past four years. They shared a sin, one no amount of regret could erase. And so Leon knew...

“...I will defeat him. He can be beaten. I know he can.”

Alice trusted the ghoul, and listened carefully without a word. Rayne, on the other hand, piped up.

“I’d love to agree,” she said, “but...how? How can a being like that be defeated?”

Leon answered without hesitation. He explained his thoughts, as well as how he planned to save the lost soul. After Rayne finished listening, she said, “...I see. Well, it’s certainly convincing enough to stake my life on.”

“It’s settled, then. All that’s left is to put the plan into action.”

With that, Leon slowly turned and walked away.

And so, the time came to confront the Ifrit. Leon stood atop a clock tower, looking over the town, and engaged the mechanism that caused the bell to toll. Its chimes rang out, signaling the start of battle.

Meanwhile, down in the streets, Alice opened her mouth and yelled.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

Her voice attracted fiends, drawn to the noise.

“Wh...wh...white...”

“Wh-wh...wh-wh-wh...wh-wh-wh-wh...”

A crowd of Black Fangs began closing in. Alice tried not to let their rapidly approaching forms throw her off as she led them through the streets. Right up to that restaurant in the main square, the White Cloud Inn, whereupon she launched herself through the glass window and into the building.

A few seconds later, the Ifrit let out a wail of anger and charged over.

“That’s got his attention,” Leon noted. “Even after becoming a fiend, he still wants to protect his memories... Or maybe that’s exactly why he’s so obsessed.”

Bound by the shackles of his past, the Ifrit swung his sword like a gale. His deadly attack instantly liquefied many of the Black Fangs.

“DEEEEEEEAAAAAAAAATHHH!”

“...I guess it’s time.”

Leon rang the bell once more, signaling for Alice to retreat...and for Rayne to take the stage.

“Wraaaaaaaagh!”

The fiends immediately began descending on her. She stood at another of the Ifrit’s memorable locations.

“DEEEEEEEAAAAAAAAATHHH!”

Leon didn’t exactly feel happy tearing down the Ifrit’s reminders of the past, but it had to be done. He needed the fiend to run out of Source. No matter how mighty it seemed now, the giant would lose its inhuman powers once the wellspring of holy energy ran dry. After all, it was once a human, and that fact would never change.

And soon came the moment that proved that fact beyond all doubt.

“DEAA—?!”

His weapons, the mementos of his fallen friends, crafted from jet-black flame. They vanished. For a moment, the colossus didn’t seem to know how to react.

“Ahh... Ahhh... AAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!”

It wailed in lamentation. Leon understood its feelings very well.

“My holy sword is a reminder of my old friends. If I lost it, I think I’d feel the same way.”

Leon knew its sadness, and the fate they both shared, but that didn’t stop him. He climbed up onto the railing, leaped into the air—and flew. Channeling the Source into his mechanical leg, he released a burst of superheated propellant that temporarily launched him upward before gravity took over and directed him down toward the sympathetic soul standing in the middle of the street.

As he fell, he spoke a prayer of salvation.

“Let mercy be my guide. Needle of Aspharas. The daemons’ plot. The wicked serpent’s tongue.”

As he plummeted out of the sky, Leon’s arm wriggled like a colony of insects and transformed, the forearm taking the shape of an enormous spear, while several pipes emerged from the upper arm and inserted themselves into Leon’s neck before draining blood from his arteries—so much that any ordinary person would pass out and die from blood loss immediately.

The blood flowed into the spear, and...

“Arts of Steel, Deploy. Abominable Armament Number Four: The Despicable Assassin’s Stabbing Strike, *Sadistic Trancer*.”

And then, Leon thrust. His spear, imparted momentum by gravity, pierced the Ifrit’s skull. That should have been the end of the fight, but it seemed the giant still had a small amount of Source remaining. It began to regenerate its shattered bone, and the black fire crept along Leon’s arm.

Yet Leon had predicted this. Number Four was no ordinary spear. The internal machinery of his prosthetic arm served to intensify the natural virulence of Leon’s blood. The strike injected it into his foe, and now it tore the colossus apart from the inside.

“Ne...e...a...”

The poison slowly broke down everything that gave the fiend life. And then...

“...Ah, you’ve come at last.”

His soul, the very same as Leon’s own, ascended to heaven, to be greeted by his old comrades once more.

“...*May your rest be eternal salvation.*”

Leon drew his four-pointed shape in the air and prayed. That the Lord’s grace might now see their shattered dream realized.

“Ah! Maaasteer!”

Leon turned to see his disciple running over to him.

“This battle,” said Rayne, appearing suddenly alongside them, “was about courage. We won thanks to your bravery. If you had seized up at the crucial moment, we would have all died. You truly are a brave man.”

At last, Leon realized. The truth was, he had been fearful all along. But what led him to victory was his compassion, his desire to help...and his trust in those around him.

“Now that’s what I call a job well done, Master!”

Alice. As long as she was around, Leon had nothing to fear. But where did that feeling come from?

“Is this...what courage really is?”

This was the answer Leon had been searching for all these years.

Alice turned to him. “Now all we have to do is pick the fruit!” she beamed.

“...Yes, that’s right. Let’s head back to the big tree.”

The three of them walked over to the courtyard in the eastern quarter of Regtelia Town.

“I wonder if this can really cure Blue-Eye, like they say,” said Rayne as she picked one off the boughs. She brought it to her lips...and took a bite. Immediately, the blue glow in her right eye vanished without a trace. It was proof the disease really had been eradicated from her body and also inspired hope that the fruit might have another effect.

“Master. Maybe if you eat one...”

Perhaps the same fruit could cure Red-Eye as well and make Leon human again.

“Using this...can I save myself? And *him*, too?”

Even as he thought it, Leon felt a sense of self-loathing. The only one he could possibly save was himself. He knew that. Becoming human again wouldn’t erase the past. It wouldn’t bring the dead back to life. Because of that...that man could never be saved.

Leon had turned his back on them. He’d abandoned his fate, his promise. And

now, because of that, he was the only one offered happiness? How was that possible? How was that...right?

“Master.”

It was Alice’s voice that brought Leon back to reality.

“When I was wandering around, searching for you, I never thought about others. I lost everything...but I didn’t want to die. I wanted to be happy, the happiest girl in the world, so I went after you, thinking you would be able to save me.”

The regret was clear in her voice. She wasn’t as selfish as she claimed.

“It was...really difficult meeting you again,” she went on. “You had changed so much. The more I got to know you, the more I felt it was true. Eventually, I realized it wasn’t just me I wanted to save, but you. And so...well...”

A sudden shyness seemed to come over her.

“I...I want...to fix you, Leon.”

Was she completely oblivious? Had the girl not realized how much of a saving grace her presence had already been?

Perhaps that was what made her next words so powerful.

“I want us both to be happy, Leon. So there’s only one way to save me, and that’s to save yourself as well.”

Leon Crossheart had a duty. A duty to make Alice happy. Was it really so bad to make that a priority? The more Leon considered it, the more he started to come around.

Perhaps I’ve been looking at this the wrong way all along. If I was strong like him, I wouldn’t have to let this guilt weigh me down... No, that’s not it. I don’t have to bear the weight alone at all.

Together, they could make it happen. Together, they could bring back the dream of salvation. Leon could save Alice at the same time he saved himself.

“...I...can do it. I can live that dream.”

The murky dregs on Leon’s heart were washed away like melting snow, and

Leon faced a new future—one filled with happiness at Alice’s—

“Ah, you really haven’t changed. You’re still the same spoiled kid you always were, *partner*.”

...A voice. Not in Leon’s mind, but in reality. *He* had finally come, directed by fate, to correct Leon’s wavering path.

“...Rghh!”

Just then, the black fruit of revival changed form, into a swarm of red-hot beetles. Leon, spotting them, grabbed Alice and leaped backward, seconds before the beetles swelled and burst.

“Haha! So you *can* save people! Too bad you couldn’t do that for me!”

Without breaking Leon’s gaze, Rayne spat something onto the floor. It was the piece of the mysterious fruit she had just bitten.

“Phew. I nearly fell for *my own trap* there.”

Faced with the figure’s masochistic smile, Leon spoke, as though his heart would burst with grief at any moment.

“...The power to save the world, and you do this.”

“Yeah? Why would I want to save the world?”

Saying this, he revealed his true form. His female body slowly changed, acquiring a devilish charm. His violet eyes stared fixedly at Leon, and his smile was one of unrivaled beauty.

“...It’s been four years, partner.”

A dream of the past, reborn as a nightmare.



Leon's happy thoughts completely vanished. He could only stare at the figure, his entire being reflected in the ghoul's crimson eyes.

Then he spoke their name.

"Rheina...!"

The use of that familiar nickname had little connection to the feelings swirling in his mind. Alice stood beside him, stunned with amazement and unable to utter a word.

For the man was none other than Rheinhardt Crossline.

"...Uh?"

Alice's mind was full of questions. It had all happened so fast, her brain couldn't keep up. Leon, however, barely even noticed his disciple's confusion. All that mattered to him was the damned friend before him—*the friend he had damned by his own actions.*

"Ah, that was fun, partner. Almost forgot the feeling of fighting side-by-side again. It really was worth luring you out here."

Those black fruits must have been created by Rheinhardt's newfound power. When Alice realized that, she yelled.

"Why?! Why would you do that? That fruit could have saved the world!"

"Oh? But you weren't interested in saving the world, were you? Only yourselves."

His gaze was callous and cold, his violet eyes devoid of any malice, hostility, or hate. Yet Alice feared for her life, like a frog transfixed by a snake.

They were on two different levels of being. That was what it felt like. And the thought made Alice shudder.

"Doesn't it remind you of how you used to be, partner? Back when Master had just taken you in and all you used to do was shiver in fright and hide behind other people... Anyway, to answer your question, missy, why did I do it? Well,

there's a lot to unpack, see..."

Rheinhardt gave a playful shrug and continued.

"Why did I set a trap for you guys specifically? Why don't I save the world even though I have the power to? Why has the man once known as Shining Rheinhardt become such a despicable villain? It's all too much to address in a single answer... So instead of speaking, I'll let my *actions* do the talking."

Rheinhardt grinned. "In other words, missy, my answer to your question...is this."

Suddenly, his entire body went blurry, and by the time Alice figured out if what she was seeing was real or not, it was already over.

He was standing before Leon, his right arm embedded in the ghoul's chest.

"Gh...ah..."

"Master!"

Leon's and Alice's cries overlapped as Rheinhardt pulled his arm free.

"Think you got all that?" he said. "This is my true objective and always has been."

His angelic smile was so graceful, so bewitching, that it made Alice feel sick.

"I want to kill. I want to destroy. Him...and the world."

Rheinhardt moved. It was beyond Alice's ability to say anything more than that. All she could see was Leon falling to the ground. She was powerless, even to tell what had been done to him, and that realization filled her with rage.

This was the man she had sworn to protect. This was the man she had sworn to make happy—with whom she swore to *be* happy.

"Haah...haah..."

Panting hard, she suppressed her rising fear and despair. She had to fight, even if it was an impossible one. She couldn't just stand by and let him be taken from her.

"O...OAAAAAAAAARGHH!"

She screamed and launched herself forward. She drew her weapon; Emilia's gift, Leon's pride.

"You're a brave young lady, I'll grant you that."

Rheinhardt disabled her without even breaking his confident smile, and Alice was lying flat on her stomach before she could even tell what had happened. She was terrified. She wondered if this was the end, but as she thought about losing the one she loved...

"Ur...gh...!"

Newfound courage flowed into her, and she tried to get back up.

"Very good, missy. Leon could learn a thing or two from you."

As soon as she pushed up from the ground, she felt a heel on her back, like a boulder pressing her into the dirt once more. She flailed, trying to extricate herself...but to no avail.

"Now, then," said Rheinhardt, looking down at her. "That's enough preamble. You're going to listen to what I say."

With this, he pointed his gaze at Leon. The ghoul didn't move.

That's right, not couldn't, *didn't*. Unlike Alice, he had the ability to move but failed to do so.

"Today I'm going to talk about...courage," Rheinhardt went on, never breaking Leon's gaze. "Now, partner. After defeating the Ifrit, did you feel like you finally realized what courage is? That wasn't wrong. The courage really has been inside of you all this time. It comes from your love and trust for this girl... However..."

Rheinhardt pressed down with his foot, grinding Alice into the dirt.

"Ugh...Gah...!"

Her pained grunts reached Leon's ear. But...

"Stop it, Rheina!"

They still didn't spur him to action. Leon was afraid of the absolute power his old friend possessed. All the self-hatred and determination he had built up over

the past four years crumbled to dust when faced with that inescapable fear.

What remained was an all-encompassing desire to live. Rheinhardt smirked at him before continuing.

“There are different kinds of courage, and that which relies upon another is the weakest of all. It’s nothing but the wishful thinking of a child who wants someone else to save them. You can’t help others with courage like that.”

So, how could you help others? Rheinhardt had the answer to that.

“The mind to live for someone else, and not just yourself, and the willingness to die for them. That’s what she has, and you don’t. The spirit of self-sacrifice.”

Leon heard a sickening crack from Alice.

“Aargh! M-Master...”

It was starting to dawn on her that she was going to die. The fear and agony were plain to see in the tears that streamed down her face. But even so...

“Run...run away!”

She didn’t ask for help. All she wanted was for Leon to be safe.

“But you still won’t do anything about it, will you, partner? That’s just who you are.”

“...You’re wrong.”

“You see, the problem with you is that there’s nobody you love more than yourself.”

“You’re wrong!”

Leon leaped forward. He didn’t know why or how he could suddenly act. His mind and heart were a mess. He was driven by emotion, not cold calculation... but was that something that could be called courage? No, it was not courage that fueled Leon’s actions.

“Courage is the power to stand *against* fear, partner. But just now, you let the fear control you. That’s not courage; that’s self-abandonment.”

Rheinhardt raised his arm and pointed. In the next moment...dozens of slice marks appeared all over Leon.

“Grh...!”

“Master?!”

He fell over again, unable to move. Rheinhardt spoke without emotion.

“Still,” he said, “being willing to sacrifice yourself is part of what courage is all about. Depending on how it goes, that could be your strength. After all, it made you act when before you could only stand still. What are self-abandonment and self-sacrifice if not two sides of the same coin? ...What I’m trying to say, partner, is if you want to be rid of me, you’re going to have to throw it all away. Only then will your promise be fulfilled.”

He smiled, like a big brother chiding his naughty younger sibling. A trickle of tears streamed down his face.

“Right, partner? You didn’t...forget...our promise...did you? ...Huh? What am I talking about? That’s...strange, I...was going to end it all here... No, I wasn’t... I wasn’t, was I?”

He wiped his eyes and lifted his foot from Alice’s back.

“Forget it, forget it! The mood’s all ruined! Besides, what fun would it be to kill you both now? No...that’s right, it’s too early. Too early...”

Rheinhardt kept muttering like a madman before finally opening his three sets of dovelike wings.

“...It has to be bigger than this. More spectacular. That’s the only way I’ll accept your death.”

It was almost like he was angry at himself for entertaining the thought in the first place.

“I need to prepare some things,” he said. “In the meantime, you’d better remake yourself, partner, or else...”

Rheinhardt didn’t finish that thought. He just looked Leon in the eye. Violet reflected in crimson. Even now, Leon could see the emotions he once felt. They hadn’t gone anywhere.

“...See you then, partner.”

He looked strangely subdued. He spread his wings and departed into the ashen sky.

“Rheina...”

Leon looked to where the figure of his friend had vanished and pondered.

“There’s still something there...”

The reminiscence brought with it weariness, and Leon found it difficult to string together a single coherent thought. Instead, he closed his eyes. Next, a figure emerged from the darkness. His fellow apprentice, calling out for help. Leon heard his voice. A promise...but also a curse through which their souls were inextricably linked.

“Hey, partner. The next time we meet, please...”

The Shining Truth and the Beginning of the End

I thought as long as he was there...

As long as he was there by my side...

...then I could do anything.

But now...

I...

To survive for long in the slums, you needed an edge. Wits, money, power, influence. My parents had none of them. When muggers killed them...I lost everything. Everything, that is, except the will to live. For I had a hope that let me dispel all the pessimism and despair.

“Remy! Look at all the grub I got for us tonight!”

“Wow! That’s amazing, big brother! I’ve never seen so much white bread at once!”

Remy, my dear little sister. With her, even the dirty corner of a filthy street felt like paradise. She was the distillation of my hopes—my dreams.

“One of the adventurers fed me already, so this is all for you.”

“Wow, really?!”

“Yeah, I’m so full, I’ll burst if I have another bite.”

So long as she was happy, then it didn’t matter how much I starved.

“I can’t believe normal people get to eat this every day. It’s so yummy,” she said.

“Yeah,” I replied. “But we’ll live like that soon. Just you wait.”

Very soon now, I would be twelve. Then I would be able to register with the guild as an adventurer and be officially recognized as a working-class citizen. That was when my life could— “Rgh...!”

My right arm ached, interrupting my thoughts.

“Big brother? What’s wrong?”

“N-nothing. I just hurt it while working, that’s all.”

As far as Remy knew, I helped carry adventurers’ equipment for them, but that wasn’t true. Instead...I sold my body for a pittance a day, but I could never tell her that.

“You wouldn’t believe the adventurers I met today...!”

I made up stories about the brave men I’d worked with and the source of my injury.

...The real reason was that a customer had been rough with me. His leering eyes were scorched into my mind. I forced myself not to throw up at the thought so that I could go on protecting my sister’s smile.

“You’re amazing, big brother. Soon you’ll be a hero, and everyone will love you! Just like Claire, the Hero of Salvation!”

Remy loved Claire. She was young and a girl just like her, and yet she was a famous hero. She made an excellent role model for my little sister.

“Big brother? Do you think I’ll ever be like her?”

An adventurer, she meant. I didn’t want that life for her... But I couldn’t risk harming that wonderful smile.

“Of course! I bet you will! You’ll be a hero just like Claire and go on adventures, and...”

“No, that’s not what I mean,” she said, shaking her head. She was innocent, pure...and precious.

“If I become like Claire, I want to stay right here and protect the people of this town. They all look so tired, day after day... I feel sorry for them.”

“I see. You’re a kind girl, Remy.”

I was proud of her. In a world of darkness, she was the blinding light. For her, I could do anything, take any pain...and sink to any low.

“Now then, it’s time for bed.”

“Okay. Nighty night, big brother.”

We cuddled up to each other by the side of the road, using each other’s body heat just to keep ourselves from freezing to death. This was how we survived the nights, but very soon now, all that would change.

Remy and I would move up in the world.

That was what I believed.

That was what I wished for.

But the world was never content to let me be happy.

After work the next day, I came back to Remy. It was dangerous in the slums, so whenever I wasn’t around, she hid in the ruins of an abandoned building. There was a hidden room there that only we knew about. There, she would remain safe. Nobody could possibly harm her.

So when I came back, I didn’t believe what I saw at first.

“Rgh...!”

As I entered, something crumpled beneath my feet. However, the nightmare before my eyes commanded my total attention.

“Re...my...?”

I couldn’t even tell at first glance whether she was my precious little sister or not. That was how badly she had been hurt. Broken.

Her naked body was covered in bruises, and her arms and legs were all bent out of shape. She was coated in a layer of semen and urine.

“Big...brother...”

“Hrh...! Remy!”

She was breathing. Faint breaths that felt like they might disappear at any moment, but my sister was alive. I ran over to her and picked her up.

“I’ll save you...!” I said. “Don’t worry; I’ll take care of you!”

Then I ran. I ran as fast as I could.

“Please, somebody help! It’s my sister! She needs help!”

I felt like I was going to spit up blood and vomit, but still I ran.

“Please! Please! My sister’s going to...! She’s going to...!”

I ran. I ran all the way, with my sister on my back, to a clinic and went inside.

But everywhere I went, I heard the same thing.

“Get out.”

And if I tried to stand my ground, their security would throw us out. Both of us, onto the cold, hard ground outside.

“Remy...! Ahh, Remy...!”

I recognized the eyes of the people walking by on the street. They weren’t seeing people. They were seeing trash lying in the road.

“This can’t be happening...! It can’t...it can’t be happening...!”

My sister wasn’t infected. She didn’t have Blue-Eye or anything. Anyone could have saved us just by offering a helping hand. Just by lending a bed, some medicine, or first aid.

That was all anyone needed to do to save my sister’s life.

“Urgh...urgh...!”

My legs gave out. I couldn’t even stand anymore. The two of us fell to the ground.

My sister was no longer breathing.

I never even heard her last words or knew at what moment she had departed this world.

“...Remy.”

I cried. Over my sister’s cold body, I cried.

But soon my tears dried up. I was left with only a single question.

“Why?”

Why had this happened? I knew the answer.

It was them. Those who looked at us and treated us like dog turds. They had killed her.

At that moment, all my sadness and grief disappeared...to be replaced by a violent fury. I stood up, heedless of the fact my legs felt like they would tear themselves apart.

I had to kill them. Nothing else mattered.

Just then, as I perched on the verge of madness, about to remove everything that made me me and replace it with a mindless, bloodthirsty rage...

“Give it up, boy.”

I jumped. I growled like a beast and threw myself at the voice. No plan or anything. Impulsive, automatic...and weak. No matter how much I punched, no matter how much I kicked, no matter how much I bit, I couldn't inflict a single mark.

“...If only I'd found you sooner,” the voice said.

I watched as a single tear flowed from their eye. Then I finally realized who it was.

Scarlet hair and a mature, adult charm. She was exactly as depicted in my sister's drawings.

Claire Redheart, the second Hero of Salvation, kneeled before my sister's body and said, *“May your rest be eternal salvation.”*

Shedding tears of anguish, she prayed for her. Seeing her, I...

“What can you possibly do for her now?”

I was overcome with such a strong emotion that all my anger from just moments ago seemed to vanish.

“What can you possibly do for her now?! Why show up now, when there's nothing you can do?!”

I could see, the woman bore us no ill will. She didn't discriminate against us or

try to get rid of us. But I hated her. That was why I hated her. I hated her so much, I couldn't stand to look at her.

"Why now?! Why...?"

Another question formed in my mind. Why did this misfortune have to happen now, of all times? Tomorrow was my twelfth birthday, and I would finally become an adventurer. I would finally be able to escape that rubbish heap we called a home.

So why did she have to show up now? If she'd been just a few minutes earlier, she could have saved my sister.

Why? Why? Why? Why?

"Wrooooooooooahhh!"

The tears I thought long since dry came back. I cried and I punched her in the face. It didn't hurt her at all, of course, but I still did it. I had to.

"You're right. I was late. It was all my fault."

Claire picked up my sister's lifeless body, even dirtying her own clothes to do so.

"We shall mourn her. Come."

I followed her. I had no choice. To a nearby church. We cleaned her corpse and listened to the priest's words. We encased her in a coffin and buried her in the graveyard.

It was obvious what would happen next. The hate and disgust swirling within me would not go away. With time, the grief would grow to envelop it. And so, as I stood alongside Claire before my sister's grave, I asked her, "Kill me."

"No," she answered.

I glanced at the sword at her waist.

"Then give me that, and I'll do it myself."

Claire looked me straight in the eye with a determined frown and said, "No. I won't let you die."

The darkness still dominated my mind.

“But there’s no reason to go on living! Remy’s gone! My sister! My...”

My everything. Without that, what worth was there in remaining on this earth?

“You have a duty,” said Claire. “She is gone, but you remain. That is why you must carry on and do the things she cannot.”

She roughly combed my hair with her hand, preventing me from talking back.

“From now on, you shall be my apprentice.”

Thus began my life with Claire. She forced me to become an adventurer and subjected me to harsh training day after day. I didn’t even have time to mourn my lost sister.

Sometimes, when her back was turned, I would grab a knife and decide to end it all. But she always appeared out of nowhere to stop me. Then, every time, she would hug me tightly and say, “Don’t let it win.”

No matter how many times I tried, she would not let me die. She just hugged me and, in doing so, dispelled my reckless delusions.

The dungeons, the villages, the towns, the fields, the snow, the heat, the wilds. Wherever she went, Claire Redheart brought salvation with her. An unconditional, unceasing salvation.

This was the person my sister idolized. This was who she wanted to be. Perhaps that was the reason that, after a while, I found myself looking up to her as well. I found myself wanting to be like her too. And in the process, my desire to die gradually faded, and in its place, a dream was born.

“Master. I’m going to be a hero. But not like you. I’m going to be famous, gain favor with the church, and become a politician. I will change this world from the inside. I will grant freedom and equality to all and create a world where nobody needs to be unhappy.”

It was the same dream Remy had once told me. Now it had become mine. A childish, unreasonable, unattainable dream, but I wouldn’t let anyone dissuade me from it.

And then, one day, I met a man who shared my dream.

“You have a choice, Nameless. Stand with humanity or live as a fiend.”

“I want...to live among humans. Even if they never accept me.”

It was a strange ghoul that Master had picked up. To be honest, when we first took him in, I found his presence vexing, but...

“When people are in trouble, I want to help them... Just like you and Master do.”

The more I got to know him, the more I saw him as a valued friend.

“If you don’t have a name, then how about I give you one? To celebrate you officially becoming a member of our party.”

Leon Crossheart. That was what I named him. And before I knew it, he had become someone very special to me.

“...It’s a funny thing, Master, to think of someone as family, even though we’re not related.”

“If that’s crazy, then I must be the maddest woman in the world.”

I came to think of him as my younger brother, despite the fact he was taller than me and not very cute at all.

But whenever I looked at him, it felt for a moment like Remy had come back to me.

“All I ever do is hold you guys back.”

“Don’t worry about crap like that. Isn’t it an elder sibling’s job to look after his kid brother?”

This time, I would be ready. This time, I would not let him die. I would protect him. I wouldn’t let him end up like her.

For him, I could do anything. Our bonds were unbreakable.

“...Anyway, that’s pretty much everything that’s happened to me.”

In one room of the vast, sprawling mansion, I finally reached the conclusion of my story. After all that, the man sitting across from me only had one thing to say.

“I see.”

Leon didn't try to offer sympathy or pity. He only listened. Listened to everything I had to say. Just as Master usually did.

“You really are the best partner a man could ask for, you know?”

My smile was met only with his characteristic indifference. But there was another face—a true face—lurking beneath the mask. A smile of triumph.

“By the way, Rheina, I think we can safely say I win again, don't you?”

He eyed my presumably bright red face and the empty casks of alcohol scattered around the place.

“Don't you think it's time to throw in the towel?”

“Huurh?! I ain't drunk yet! You're drunk!”

In a display of spirit, I grabbed another mug and attempted to down the contents...only to quickly have my limits reiterated.

“Bleeegh...”

As I emptied my guts, Leon only took a calm sip and spoke gently.

“Heh. How is it you can be my superior in blade and arm and yet be so truly inadequate when it comes to holding your drink? It feels good to finally be able to beat you at something.”

“Don't you realize how pathetic that sounds?”

“Not at all. It's kind of nice, actually.”

The wine of victory must truly be as sweet as they say. Leon even hummed a tune as he drank it.

“You really are the best partner ever, you son of a bitch.”

My previous line returned with a hint of irony. Just then, I heard footsteps coming our way.

The door swung open, and in walked Claire Redheart, our teacher and mother.

“...Master, there you are,” said Leon.

“I guess you’re all done with work?” I ventured.

“Yeah, I—” she replied, then she saw the state of the room she had just entered. “Wh-what the hell have you dooooooone?!”

Judging from her screams, you’d think the end times had come.

“Oh, sorry we didn’t wait for you, Master, but it’s nothing to scream about...”

“Not thaaat! I spent ages maturing that wine! It was going to go down as the greatest taste in history!”

“Oh. Guess we fucked up, partner.”

“...Hold up,” said Leon. “What’s this ‘we’ business? As I recall, you were the one who arranged all this.”

“That’s true, but if we count up how much we each drank, then I think you’ll find you’re no angel either. In fact, it was basically all you, so if you think about it, this is kind of your fault.”

“What sort of logic is that? This is the thing about you, you’re always—”

“You’re both to blame!” yelled Claire, bonking us over the head in sync before proceeding to give us a stern telling-off. So far, same as always. Except...

“Now, then. Now that I’ve calmed down, it’s time to say what I came here for.”

Something about her changed. She seemed to grow serious, and that could only mean one thing.

“Oh no, it’s not another boring job, is it?”

“The church hasn’t mistaken us for their errand boys, have they, Master?”

Leon and I voiced our concerns.

“It’s Night Walker,” said Master. “You’ve heard of them, I presume?”

“I don’t think anyone hasn’t,” Leon replied.

“They’re famous. Assuming they’re still alive, we should try to get their autograph.”

Master sighed at my little jest and continued.

“Unfortunately, I think the only thing you’re likely to get from them is a knife in the throat.”

“...Huh? You mean...”

“That’s right. Our job is to take them down.”

“Whoa, seriously?”

I hadn’t expected a job like that. While I was still reeling in shock, Leon answered her.

“...Night Walker is a criminal genius who has eluded the authorities for almost seventy years. They’re beyond our expertise. Besides, we specialize in fiends, not men.”

“You’re quite right. Which brings me to my next point.”

Master spoke on. Of the truth surrounding that enigmatic figure.

“This has only recently been proven,” she said, “but...they aren’t human. They’re a Red-Eye, just like you, Leon.”

“...I see. In that case, I can see how my power would come in handy.”

“Right. You have the power to see into a fiend’s past. Using that, we might be able to find some clues.”

Master unfurled a map onto the table. It was a map of Yugosland, the Holy City.

“Just the other day, Night Walker incited a riot here, in the seventh district. The corpse of their victim, and the message written in their blood, have been preserved exactly as they were.”

“Then we should head over and investigate.”

I nodded at my partner’s words and stood up.

“A legendary killer, huh? Not a bad adversary, if you ask me.”

Leon rose to his feet as well and declared, “I was hoping to try out a new technique I’ve been preparing. I will bring back Night Walker’s head, mark my words.”

It was like he was saying, “*I won’t let you hog all the glory.*” I smiled, and said, “In that case, let’s make it interesting. Whoever fails to catch the killer has to treat the other to a top-class Veil Meat steak.”

As we sealed the deal by touching fists, Master sighed and said, “Just don’t let down your guard, okay?”

Everything was just as it always was. At that moment, I hadn’t the slightest suspicion that this case would be anything other than another pebble in our path, so easily kicked aside.

But that all changed when I met him.

Thus the Ghoul Decided to End It All

I was dreaming.

It was a sweet and loving dream.

But I let my folly consume me. I let it lead me astray.

I forgot my mission. I forgot my sadness. I forgot my sin.

But I must never forget my promise.

And so, this dream is over.

This happy dream...is over.

This is the end, Leon Crossheart.

This is the end, Alice Campbell.

Leon stirred. He opened his eyes...to see the ceiling of his own home. He was lying in his own bed.

“Master!”

Turning his head, he saw the girl place her hand to her breast and breathe a sigh of relief. He loved her. Or at least, that was the impression he had been under. But right now she represented something else entirely.

“Give your report, Leon.”

It was Emilia, standing in a corner of the room, who spoke next. She looked furiously impatient.

“It’s Rheina. He’s back,” the ghoul replied.

The ire in Emilia’s eyes at that moment could not be described even with a thousand words.

“...I see, I see.”

Whatever hope she may yet have harbored had been demolished. With hollow eyes, she spoke.

“Come to my workshop tomorrow. We’ll finish the job there.”

Then she staggered over to the door and left the room.

“Master,” spoke Alice, and her eyes said, *“Tell me everything.”*

There was nothing left to hide. Leon was no longer fit to be the girl’s teacher, but at least he could teach her one last thing: the secret he had planned to take to the grave.

“Let me tell you about the disaster that occurred here, in this city, on the day of the Festival of the Holy Spirit,” Leon explained. “The people say that I started it, but that’s not completely true. It all began with the infamous serial killer, Night Walker.”

Leon’s words made Alice remember something. Something Emilia had mentioned when the two of them first met.

Namely, that Night Walker possessed the power to turn humans into fiends.

“You don’t mean...,” she muttered. “Rheinhardt was...!”

Leon nodded. As he spoke, he clenched his fists.

“We succeeded in tracking him down...and defeating him. But in the fight, Rheina...”

He recalled only fragments. His fellow apprentice charging the enemy. Night Walker falling, and...

“I should have saved him...! I should have died, not him...!”

But he was too scared. He was too cowardly.

He was just a spoiled little child.

“I was selfish, and for that I watched him die! I watched as my best friend was killed!”

He howled. Leon cried without weeping.

“If only I had done the right thing, then Rheina wouldn’t have been turned into a fiend! My master wouldn’t have had to die!”

What exactly had led to that tragic state of affairs? Alice still didn’t have all the answers, but she intended to pry no further. She didn’t need to know, and Leon didn’t need to reopen his old wounds just for her sake.

I want to heal him. I want to soothe his wounded heart. But how? Perhaps it’s already too late...

As Alice racked her brain, Leon continued talking.

“When a human becomes a fiend, it calls upon their most powerful emotions and their darkest memories. Those become what drives the fiend forward. For Rheina...that’s hate.”

Hate toward those that left his sister to die, and...

“Hate toward me, who did the same thing to him. I betrayed his trust to save my own skin. There’s no way he doesn’t hate me after that.”

Alice said nothing. She couldn’t just say, *“He would never think of you that way,”* as though she knew anything about him. She had no choice but to stay silent.

“...What happened to those two is all my fault. I stole the light from their lives. My foolish ideas brought ruin upon us all. So that’s why...”

He had to be punished. He had to live an awful life. That was why he told everyone that it was him. That he had slain his own friends. It was his punishment. It was what he wanted.

“This way, I protect their memory. That’s what I live for, and one day, it’s what I’ll die for. One day, very soon now.”

There was little doubt that Rheinhardt was planning an assault on Yugosland. Karna Village and the Village of the Kin-Eaters were just precursors. A trial run.

“The next time we meet, I’ll atone for my sin. I’ll save Rheina, no matter what it takes. I won’t break my promise to him.”

For that, he was willing to throw it all away. Alice looked into his burning, crimson eyes. They looked different now. There was none of the light she had

brought him, only a deep, furious conviction.

“...You don’t have to do this,” she said, even as she knew her words were a waste of breath. “You can’t defeat someone like that. You’ll just be walking to your death. What’s the point in that? Why would you throw your life away when you could live here with me?!”

But she knew. No matter what she said of love, he would not listen.

“I don’t have a choice. I have to be the one to stop him.”

Leon could not entertain any other possibility. The only choice in his mind was to go on walking into his own destruction.

“If all I cared about was killing him, then you’d be right. There’s no reason for me to risk my life. But that’s not what I’m after. I don’t want to kill him; I want to save him.”

Ah, now it all made sense. That was why he wouldn’t be deterred. That was why he *couldn’t* be deterred.

“Even death cannot release a fiend from the curse of their past,” Leon said. “They always return to repeat their sins. I’m the only one who can stop the endless cycle. The only one who can break those chains and grant them their eternal rest.”

She knew that. Alice knew that. It was Leon’s destiny to deliver Rheinhardt’s salvation.

“B-but if you do that, you’ll die!”

If Leon were truly the same as his monstrous brethren, then Alice would have no cause to object. But he was a Red-Eye and thus would not revive. If killed, it would truly spell his end. If killed, his existence would be gone for all eternity.

“...Please. Don’t do it. Don’t go.”

Alice pleaded. Even though she knew what he would say.

“Don’t leave me behind, all by myself. I...can’t do it without you.”

But Leon spared not even a glance toward his partner’s face or her trembling lip. The image of his fellow apprentice was scorched into his eyes—into his very

mind, and that was all he saw.

“...He’s crying, Alice. Deep down, he’s crying. ‘*Kill me,*’ he’s saying. He’s waiting for me.”

Leon saw it, when the two reunited beneath those vast boughs. Hidden in the murky gloom of Rheinhardt’s heart, there was something still shining. Beneath the anger, the hate, the destruction, the humiliation...

“He wants *me* to stop him. His only family in the whole world.”

Leon could not betray him a second time. He would save his partner, even if it cost him his life.

“...”

Alice said and did nothing. She stood stock-still and stared. But nothing seemed to change, and after a long while, she turned and silently left the room.



A few days later, Alice went over alone to Unbreakable, the weapons shop. She cut through the artlessly arranged storefront and into the workshop in the back.

Suddenly, she was hit by a rusty iron stench. The smell of fresh blood. It was so overpowering that it made Alice wonder just what Leon had been subjected to when he came through here just earlier.

In the center of the workshop sat Emilia. Scattered around her were nineteen empty wine bottles, with the twentieth in her hand on the way to her lips.

“I don’t get drunk, you know...no matter how much I drink. I can down a bottle but the bottle’ll never down me...!” Emilia turned her giddy, weary smile on Alice and asked, “So? What’re you here for?”

“You know very well why I’m here.”

Emilia sniffed nonchalantly. “You know,” she said, immediately and inelegantly changing the subject, “the other day, the Church designated Rheina as an Archfiend.”

“...An Archfiend?”

“Yeah, a fiend even more powerful than a Special Class. He’s really gone off the deep end, that one. There’s no doubt his aim is to destroy the Holy City. When the Church realized that, they started putting together a plan to fight back. Leon’s name came up, of course. Guess they finally found their chance to dispose of him while getting some use out of him.”

Emilia’s eyes indicated how she truly felt. She was thinking about giving up. About resigning Leon to his fate.

But Alice wasn’t going to surrender him so easily.

“There is still hope. Miss Emilia, you have influence with them, do you not? Surely you can negotiate on Leon’s behalf. You don’t need to persuade them all, just a majority, and then—”

“Get real. That’s never going to happen.”

Her dark green eyes were filled with apathy. No doubt she had spent the past four years trying to do precisely that. Trying to save Leon, to alter his fate, but all her attempts had ended in failure. The anomalous fruit had been her last hope, but it vanished like a mirage on the desert sands.

And this was the result. A woman totally resigned to an unwinnable future. To Alice, it was like looking in a mirror, and that was why she had to deny it.

“...Is that all Master was to you? I thought you’d been together for ten years. You know him better than anybody. Even Claire and Rheinhardt weren’t with him for that long!”

Alice’s ceaseless, unending emotion poured out of her as words.

“Why give up? How can you possibly give up? How can you look at your relationship as though it’s a purely transactional one? Maybe if you’d kept fighting for Leon, then—”

“Shut up, missy.”

Those dark green eyes. Emilia’s eyes. They glared at Alice with a red-hot incandescent heat.

“What? If I’d kept fightin’ for Leon, he would have abandoned his promise? Don’t make me laugh! We both know that would never happen. He’s the same

as other fiends: chained to his past and bound by it. He couldn't give a shit about me."

But again, Emilia's gaze said what she really thought:

What could you possibly know? What could you possibly know about me? About us? Nothing, so stay out of it. You had your chance, and now there's nothing you can do.

Alice wasn't about to let that go unanswered—even if it hadn't been said. But before she could speak...

"Besides, you have no right to stop him."

It was as if Emilia was trying to open up Alice's old wounds and rub salt in them.

"Don't think I forgot how happy you were when you learned Leon was the only person who could put fiends down for good. That wasn't just because he could save the world...was it?"

There was nothing Alice could hide from her piercing gaze. Emilia went on.

"I looked into you, young lady. Your mother turned into a fiend and attacked you. It was then that Leon turned up, killed her, and saved your life. You felt sad, you felt angry, but that's not all. Somewhere, deep down, you felt relieved, didn't you? Relieved that your mother would never come back and commit any more sins."

Alice did not answer, but her trembling shoulders said it all.

"When you heard about Leon's ability, you felt a peace like no other. You wanted to kill your mother while she was still human, but you couldn't do it. And so, when she turned into a fiend, you felt like you'd condemned her. But thanks to Leon, she got her eternal rest. And how relieved you were to hear that. Now, you know where I'm going with this, don't you?"

Alice clenched her teeth. She had no choice but to hold her tongue and await the inevitable.

"You understand the way Leon feels more than anyone. It was Leon who gave you that peace, and now you want to tell him not to pursue it himself?"

Emilia's words were like a fatal blow to the heart.

"Get real. How selfish can you get?"

Alice could not respond. She had no words with which to do so.

"Now, are you just gonna stand there gettin' in the way of my work? Meh. Makes no difference to me. In fact, why not join me for a drink?"

The smile returned to Emilia's face. The sad, lonely smile of one who had given up on everything.

Alice found herself unable to do a thing.



The large public square in the south of the city was filled with the usual smiling faces. Street performers fascinated onlookers, and among them, one stunned the audience with seemingly miraculous magical illusions.

"Ahh, thank you, thank you," he said to the crowd in a foppish tone that matched the jester's mask covering his face. "However, thus ends today's performance. Ah, no need to offer coin. I'm not here for money, you see."

Casually deflecting the audience's praise, the man bowed.

"Wow, you're a real star."

"How ever did you do that last trick?"

"There are no tricks," the man replied with a cackle. "Everything you see is one-hundred-percent genuine!"

Then he placed his hands to his mask.

"Now, that wasn't much of a break, but it's time to begin act two! ♪"

When he removed it, the entire crowd stared in shock. The man was beautiful, to be sure, but that was not the only reason.

"M-my god... You look just like him...!"

The man's face reminded the crowd of only one person. A man who died in this very city only four years prior.

“Haha. Oh, but I am no impersonator,” the man grinned. “For it is I, Rheinhardt Crossline, returned and in the flesh.”

Nobody laughed. The resemblance was simply too uncanny for it to be dismissed as a tactless joke.

His long, silky silver hair. His cherubic features. His impressive bearing. They were all the same as those possessed by the city’s old beacon of hope.

“I-it’s really him!”

“He didn’t die after all!”

It was surprising how quickly they believed his words. Surprising, unless you knew how eagerly the people awaited his return. They wanted it to be true. Needed it to be true.

“Where have you been all this time?” one asked.

“Well, I was injured, you see, in the battle four years ago. Regrettably, I’ve been convalescing ever since.”

“And you’ve come back to...? Of course! To take what is rightfully yours!”

“Hm? Rightfully mine?”

“Your title! The Hero of Salvation! It was supposed to be you who succeeded Lady Redheart! But that traitor, that miserable ghoul! He stole it from you!”

“Miserable ghoul, you say?”

None of the eager onlookers noticed the terrible grin forming on Rheinhardt’s lips.

“All right, then. Let’s begin with you,” he said, pointing at the man who just spoke. The man looked puzzled and tilted his head. Rheinhardt, meanwhile, opened his arms, like an angel spreading its wings.

“The reason I returned to this place is simple,” he said. “I have come to rescue you all from this wretched existence.”

This excited the crowd. They were all thrilled to see the return of their hero and a reemergence of hope.

“Today,” he went on, his angelic features gleaming, “all who live in the Holy

City shall be saved. Do you understand what that means?”

Salvation was back to reclaim his name. The crowd awaited these words with bated breath and starry-eyed hope.

He laughed. He laughed at their foolish ideas and declared, “The answer...is extermination.”

In the next instant, a large hole appeared in the side of the head of the man Rheinhardt was pointing at. There was a thud, and his cranial fluid scattered across the floor. However, soon after, the man got back to his feet as though nothing had happened.

The spectators thought it some kind of bizarre performance. Rheinhardt gave a cold smile as the man, now transformed into a ghoul, sunk his teeth into the lady standing next to him.

“Huh?”

Blood sprayed out of her like a fountain, casting a crimson wave across the sky before splashing onto the faces of the crowd. Only then did they finally realize something was wrong.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaghhh!”

Their faces paled. It was a terrifying, primal reaction. Whatever they thought of their hero before, they now only sought to escape as fast as possible.

“Hahahahaha! Scatter, scatter! You shall be my messengers! Let everyone hear! Their hero, Shining Rheinhardt, is back in town, and he’s come to kill you all!”

Thus, the actor took to the stage, and drew open the curtain on the second act of his great tragedy.



“...It’s over,” muttered Emilia in her workshop at the back of Unbreakable, amid the smell of rusty iron. “It’s all over.”

“...Yeah. That’s what makes it so easy to do what I must.”

Leon lay atop a bed, his abdomen sliced open from one side to the other.

Emilia was just at that moment finishing up her work.

“You don’t have to do this, you know.”

“No, I do. If I’m too scared to cross this line, then what chance do I stand against him?”

With Leon’s tuning complete, Emilia sealed up his stomach.

“...Looks like the messenger’s here,” she said as an owl flew into the open-air workshop and perched atop a bench. It focused its mechanical eyes on Leon and opened its beak.

“Confirmed angel sighting. Make haste. The location is...”

It began speaking human words. As Emilia said, the owl was a messenger. An envoy of death.

“...”

The situation was proceeding far out of Alice’s hands. She could do nothing but remain silent.

“So we wouldn’t have made it in time anyway, even if we tried to evacuate the citizens,” remarked Emilia with a shrug. It couldn’t have been long since Rheinhardt put his plan into action, but the panic was already spreading across the town.

“...I have to stop him,” said Leon, climbing to his feet, as the screams of townsfolk echoed in the distance.

One by one, innocent civilians were losing their lives. Their blood was on Leon’s hands. If his sacrifice could save even a single one of them, then he would gladly cast himself into hell, bearing the weight of his brother’s sins.

“Have you prepared a testimony?” he asked Emilia.

“Yeah. Don’t worry about the history books. Just leave it to me.”

Leon breathed a sigh of relief. His final wish was for this atrocity to go down in his name, just like the one four years ago. His brother’s honor, eternally preserved.

Leon turned to leave, but just as he reached the door, Alice called out to him.

“Wait.”

Alice hesitated as she tried to put her thoughts into words, but Leon never let her speak.

“After this is all over,” he said, “you will be the Hero of Salvation and inherit the holy sword. As a hero, you’ll meet all sorts of people. Eventually...even someone to replace me.”

“Huh?” said Alice, aghast. She immediately formed a rebuttal, but Leon continued speaking before she could put it to words.

“I told myself I had a responsibility to make you happy, but that was just an excuse. I was only interested in saving myself. I never truly wanted you to be happy. Because of that, I don’t deserve to stand by your side... I’m afraid, Alice...”

Leon turned around. There was no mercy in his eyes. No kindness and no love.

He’d thrown it all away.

All that was left was his promise. The promise to the brother he failed.

“I’m afraid this is the end. Of us.”

It was just like Rheinhardt said. The only way to fulfil his promise was to throw everything away. Leon was okay with that. He’d made his peace. If the only way he could grow strong was through loss, then he would lose and lose until there was nothing left.

“I won’t—*Urgh...*”

Alice was about to say, “*I won’t allow it!*” and try to stop Leon, but before she could, Emilia approached and delivered a chop to her neck. With a grunt of pain, she slumped to the ground, her consciousness fading.

The ghoul frowned sorrowfully.

“...I’m sorry, Alice, but I’m a coward. I can never be like you, no matter how hard I try. You have the courage to strengthen your frightened heart. I don’t have anything like that.”

The power he sought was the power of self-sacrifice. Every time he laid down his life, his attachment wore thinner and thinner, until finally, now, he was ready. Ready to lose the one thing he truly held dear. His fear had become a longing. A longing for death.

Now he spoke. The final words of a teacher to his apprentice.

“Be happy,” he said. “For this foolish ghoul cannot.”

This exchange, from Leon to his helpless disciple, would be their last.

After Alice’s eyelids closed at last, he picked her up and laid her on the bed before unhooking the holy sword from his belt.

“This belongs to you. At least now it will be in the hands of someone who deserves it.”

He stroked her silver hair, for what he knew would be the last time.

“...Now there is nothing left for me on this earth.”

That was what he needed. That was what he believed in. And with that belief in his heart, he turned to Emilia.

“...What? Don’t you have somewhere to—”

“I’m sorry, Emilia. For everything.”

The ghoul bowed his head. They would not be seeing each other again. This was farewell, and so out came everything that needed to be said.

“I never was able to return your feelings, yet you stuck by my side the entire time. For that, you have my sincerest gratitude.”

Emilia turned around and muttered, “...Just be on your way, you rotten ghoul!”

Leon turned too, to leave, and said, “Thank you.”

Just then, a faint sound from behind him made Leon’s hand tremble...but he didn’t stop. He left the shop and entered the stream of panicked townsfolk. Carving a path through them, Leon headed to fulfil his promise and to bring an end to it all.

“...Rheina.”

The events of four years ago played in his mind, spurring him on. He lived and breathed his own past.

“...I won’t make the same mistake this time.”

The regrets, the anger, they guided him. Guided him to where he would finally face the music and confront his own death.

He swam through the sea of people. The notion of turning back never even occurred to him.

The Ghoul's Crime and the Dream's End

Someone's making fun of me. Calling me pathetic.

Someone's laughing at me. Calling me a burden.

Why do I keep trying in spite of that?

Why do I want to catch up, to stand alongside them, to puff out my chest with pride?

It's because I was told to believe.

It's because I swore to protect.

And yet.

Leon Crossheart.

Why are you so determined?

Why am I so determined?

Night Walker. It was over seventy years ago I first heard that name. His record number of killings could not be matched, even stretching two thousand years back into antiquity.

He only killed at night, and he always left a poem, written in the victim's blood, at the scene of each gruesome crime. These whimsical acts captured the hearts of writers and storytellers everywhere, and many works were penned about accounts both real and invented.

For a long time, the truth behind this serial killer mastermind lay shrouded in darkness beneath a veil of secrecy.

Namely, that he was in fact a Red-Eyed fiend.

Night Walker was a vampire, a race gifted with strength and unnatural healing far beyond human capabilities. Most normal vampires possessed these two abilities, and though fearsome, they earned only a Class Two designation at most.

Night Walker was different, however. He commanded two further powers not shared with the rest of his kind. The first was transfiguration. He could transform humans into fiends and control them. Furthermore, if those he dominated went on to slay others, those would also become fiends under his thrall.

And for that reason, Yugoslavia had been thrown into pandemonium.

“Rooooooooooaaaghhh!”

Master Claire’s roar mixed with the shrieks and screams coming from all around us. She was outnumbered massively. Much of the entire population of the city had been transformed into fiends, and she was doing all she could just to stay alive.

Meanwhile, there was us. Rheina and I. Standing together against him.

“Ahh, how unpleasant. I only wanted to observe, you know.”

His words fit together like a song, or a prayer. A charming voice that stuck in our minds and refused to leave. The ground upon which he stood seemed like another world, filled with brightness and joy.

Only one word was needed to describe him. Beautiful.

Beautiful hair, beautiful skin, beautiful lips, beautiful face. His bearing, his formal clothes; everything that comprised him was forged of beauty.

But at the same time...it was a terrifying beauty.

Night Walker.

Without once sacrificing his noble demeanor, he flipped to a page in his notebook and began speaking.

“I am a wandering bard, who exists for one reason and one reason only. To observe people’s lives, their deaths, and to write about them in my poetry. And here you come, with your barbaric violence, to obstruct me in my calling.”

Even the man’s plaintive sigh was one of beauty. Glaring at this remorseless killer, I shot a glance at my fellow apprentice.

“Listen to me, Rheina. Watch out for the Evil Eye. Don’t meet his gaze, whatever you do.”

This was the second of Night Walker’s unique abilities. The Evil Eye.

“The second you look into his eyes, you’ll be struck with madness, resulting in death. Only ever look at his feet, got it?”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. But it doesn’t work on you, partner, does it?”

Just before the battle began, I had met his gaze for a moment. For an ordinary person, that moment would have spelled my end. But for whatever reason, the Evil Eye did not affect me. Or rather, not enough to immediately cause a change in my behavior.

“I’ve been feeling strange ever since it happened,” I said. “I think if the battle goes on too long, I might succumb to it.”

“Hmm... Now, that’s concerning. Oh well, I guess we have no choice.”

“Yeah. I’ll take point for this battle. Leave everything to me.”

“Oh, wow! Big strong Leon! You’re my hero!” Rheina joked, but Night Walker did not take kindly to our levity.

“Well, you two seem confident,” he said with a frown.

“You bet your ass,” Rheina shot back. “There’s no way we’re gonna lose to a third-rate goon like you.”

“Hmm. And this seems to mirror your thinking as well, my crimson-eyed compatriot.”

“Of course. As long as I have Rheina by my side, nothing can go wrong.”

For some reason, my answer made him glare at me.

“...I’ve changed my mind,” he said. “I shall construct, at this moment, a fork in

the road of your life.”

Then, he looked elsewhere, at Rheina, and his lips curled up into a grin. What wickedness was he planning?

“Rheinhardt Crossline,” he said. “I must commend you on your transformation. It’s good to see you on the straight and narrow when you were once so twisted.”

“...Huh? What are you talking about?” Rheina asked.

“Oh, have you forgotten? Or did you just not realize it?”

With a smile that was hard to stomach, the fiend spoke. Of Rheina’s past, and of the truth concealed within.

“Your sister...Remy, was it? Do you not remember the note placed by her corpse?”

Rheina’s shoulders twitched. Apparently seeing some humor in his reaction, Night Walker chuckled before continuing.

“Well, I don’t blame you. There was a lot on your mind, no doubt, what with the death of your beloved sibling and all. Not everybody checks their feet at a time like that. But let me ask you, did you never have any doubts? Did you never wonder what fiends left your sister in such a state? What...inhuman fiends?”

The repulsive killer gave a deep, throaty laugh. Rheina growled and asked one simple question.

“...Was it you?”

The vampire’s answer?

“Me? No. I merely observed. Observed as my thralls left her a sodden wreck.”

He spoke of how she called for her brother, right until the end. All the while, her young body was torn apart, destroying her both mentally and physically.

“Oh, the way she cried. *‘Help me, big brother!’* It was just so...funny.”

The moment he spoke those words, a violent fury drove the twin swords in Rheina’s hands.

“Motherfucker! I’ll kill you!”

He howled. Like a wild beast.

“Rgh...! Rheina! Wait!”

My words of caution achieved nothing. He hurled himself at his nemesis. At Night Walker, his sister’s killer.

“Oooaaaaaaaaaaaaaghhh!”

His slices were erratic, careless. But Rheina was a once-in-a-lifetime savant. Even guided by anger and hate, his swordsmanship was just as formidable as ever. In fact, the passion only made his strokes even harder to predict.

“Rooooaaaaaaaaaaaaaghhh!”

An unstoppable force. A whirlwind of steel. Looking at it, I had no choice but to conclude that *this* was the true Rheina. The one I’d never seen. The Rheina I knew suppressed his anger in order to maintain a veneer of civility. He was not even half as fearsome as the beast that raged before me now.

...And yet...

“Dance, Rheinhardt, dance! Fiercer, braver! Show the world how you can truly shine!”

That Rheina, a blizzard the likes of which I had never seen, could not land one single hit on the killer Night Walker.

“Impossible...!”

He was losing. My fellow, my friend. My idol, my pride.

The murderer was going to win.

“Krh...!”

I needed to help, but I couldn’t go near. The fight unfolding before my eyes might well have been taking place on a different plane of existence. I would only hold my friend back.

“Dammit...!”

I gritted my teeth in shame of my cowardice. How arrogant had I been, saying,

“Leave everything to me” only a few minutes prior? All I could do now was pray. Pray for Rheina’s victory.

However...

“You’ve granted me an opening, Rheinhardt.”

Night Walker’s bloodred saber descended upon Rheina’s heart.

“Grh...!”

I could only brace myself for the inevitable conclusion. Await the decisive moment.

And then it came.

“Juuust kidding!”

The victor was not Night Walker.

It was my friend and fellow apprentice, Rheinhardt Crossline.

It almost seemed like all the wrath of only a few moments ago had been mere showmanship... For indeed, it was. With deft, fluid movements, he dodged the killer’s blade, and...

“Raagh!”

In one clean slice, he cut the fiend shoulder to hip.

“Urgh...”

A spray of blood, and the maniac crumpled backward. Rheina kept his blades leveled at his foe, speaking quickly.

“You were right,” he said. “I’ve gone straight. It’s all thanks to my master...and my sworn brother, see?”

His words, and the feelings within, stole the breath from my lungs. I was ashamed that, for just one moment, I had doubted him. He was braver than that, I knew. He wouldn’t bend the knee to any of this fiend’s tricks. Rheina was the light that shone on people’s hearts, illuminating them and banishing the darkness. Nothing could occlude that light, even for an instant.

“Rheina! You really are...!”

He was separated from his past, eyes fixed firmly on the now, and working toward a glorious future.

I was so proud of him for that.

“This is the end, Night Walker.”

This was it. In a moment, my fellow apprentice’s sword would pierce the bastard’s heart, reducing him to liquefied rot. Only then would it all finally be over. The rest of the fiends, bereft of their leader, would be easy to mop up, allowing us to bring an end to—

“Yes. It is... For you.”

The next instant, an exceedingly bizarre thing happened.

Time stopped. The entire world ground to a halt.

My sworn brother, sword poised on the verge of delivering the final blow. My master, fending off an entire army of thralls by herself. Neither of them moved so much as a muscle. Even the ceaseless cacophony of screams and destruction I had been hearing off in the distance was suddenly no more.

“What’s...happening?”

I alone was unaffected... Or so I thought at first.

But that black-hearted fiend, Night Walker, let out a rattling chuckle.

“Did you forget?” he said. “You are under the command of my ability.”

It was he who had done this. But as soon as I realized that fact, Night Walker rose to his feet...and in a bone-chilling display, produced a sword of his own, forged of his blood right then and there.

A shiver ran down my spine as I realized his intent.

“No! Stop it!”

“Gladly. Assuming you are willing to offer yourself in his place, that is.”

The bastard presented me the ultimate decision.

“I will now slowly slide my sword between Rheinhardt Crossline’s ribs. If you

wish to stop me, you need only fire your gun. However, be warned that the moment you do, I shall separate your head from your shoulders.”

No sooner did he finish these words than he began making true on them. His crimson sword started sinking into Rheina’s flesh.

“Grh...! Y-you maniac!”

I drew my pistol and pointed it square at his head.

However.

“What’s the matter? Pull the trigger. You know you want to. It’s simple. One twitch of your finger, and I’ll be gone.”

He was right. One pull, and my dear friend’s life would be saved...and my own damned in its place.

“You can’t, can you? That’s so like you.”

I watched as the blade plunged into his flesh, slowly stealing away Rheina’s life.

“You only care about yourself, and to save your own skin you’ll gladly condemn others, even your dearest friend. That’s just who you are.”

I wanted to deny it. I needed to deny it.

With one pull of my finger, I could prove him wrong.

But fear consumed me, and I couldn’t do a thing about it.

“You never loved these two at all. You simply used them. Needed them. Any talk of protecting them or growing strong for them was merely a lie.”

I could sense it. My time was running thin. I needed to choose. Rheina. My friend. My dear, dear brother... Or me. With my life, he could be saved.

“Urh... Rrrraaaaaaagh!”

With a yell, I pulled the trigger. The bang of gunpowder filled my ears.

However...my bullet did not strike the fiend’s head. Instead, it hit a nearby lamppost and disappeared.

“You see now. You cannot change who you are.”

The blade mercilessly advanced.

“Feel it. *A remorse thrice-born. A maddening sickness.*”

His mocking voice rang in my head. It was over. The bastard’s sword pierced Rheina’s heart, and all of a sudden, time began to flow once more.

“Gah...”

Rheina, stabbed through the heart, crumpled to the ground.

“No...”

My legs failed me, and I fell to my knees.

“This isn’t happening... It’s not true, it’s not true, it’s not true!”

I was so aghast, I just repeated the same words over and over, like a fool.

Then, as I weakly railed against my fate, Night Walker came over to me.

“Rheinhardt’s life was in your hands. Now they are stained with his blood.”

“Grh...! N-no! I didn’t...! I didn’t...!”

I couldn’t speak another word. What the bastard was saying was the undeniable truth.

“Yes, you did. You abandoned him. You selfishly abandoned your dearest friend.”

“Urgh...Urgh... Agh...”

My teeth rattled like chains. Seemingly enjoying my disgrace, the fiend smiled.

“You are cursed. Death will always follow you around. *Just like it did in your last life, and the one prior to that as well.*”

Then he raised his right hand overhead, like the executioner poised to deliver the final blow.

“Now, then. I hope this doesn’t happen a fourth time, but who can say?”

His hand fell, taking the shape of a blade. I couldn’t move. I was frozen in terror, able to do little more than tremble in fright.

However.

“Roooooaaaaaagh!”

A scream. A roar. From the mouth of my fallen brother, Rheina.

The next moment, I heard the sound of rending flesh.

Rheina had put his sword right through Night Walker’s heart.

“Guh...”

A splutter of blood. Crimson liquid fell from the killer’s lips.

But he did not fear his approaching death. In fact, he seemed to revel in it.

“Now, cursed one. This...is where the true tragedy begins.”

He melted away, bit by bit, until all that remained of the heinous killer was a rotting puddle on the ground.

However, there was no Testament Stone. The proof of his death was nowhere to be found.

“R-Rheina!”

I had more pressing concerns. I ran over to him and picked him up in my arms. What I saw shocked me to my very core. His eyes were becoming those of a fiend. His right was bloodred, while his left had turned a sapphire blue.

Those multicolored eyes he then turned on me and whispered into my breast.

“Hey, partner... Why didn’t you save me?”

He smiled as he said it.

“Did you think I wouldn’t notice?”

A deathly potent smile.

“I remember now. It was you.”

Tears fell from his right eye. Hate dwelled within his left.

“I’ll kill you for this...traitor.”

Before I could react, my right arm and left leg...were gone. My precious limbs vanished in the blink of an eye.

“Haha! Hahahahahaha! What the hell?! Such a horrible ecstasy! Such a sublime agony! Ahahahahahahaha!”

Rheina looked down at me as I squirmed, and a cruel smile spread across his lips. It was not a human smile...but nor was it a completely inhuman one.

“Ahh! Ahh! Ahh! This is so not fun! Live, partner, live!”

His contradictory words were laced with bloodthirsty innocence. As I watched in terror, he conjured an enormous pillar of ice above me.

I was doomed. I was sure of it. But just then...

“Leon!”

Master stood before me, using the heat of her Sacrament to melt the ice away.

“What are you doing, Master?! I’m so glad you’re in my way!”

Rheina’s attention turned to Master. In response, she drew her holy sword and said, “This...is my sin to bear.”

It was like a nail in my heart. Master must have seen everything, yet she wasn’t blaming me. She took everything upon herself.

“Mas...ter...!”

I reached out my hand. I could do nothing else before their battle began.

The two struggled, locked in mortal combat. And then...

“Hah!!”

“Ghh?!”

Master sliced open Rheina’s torso.

However, the cut was shallow. Perhaps she still harbored some doubt over fighting her own disciple. Rheina was not fatally wounded and was still able to turn and run.

“I won’t let you escape! I’ll finish you here!”

Her eyes filled with heartbreak and sorrow, Master nonetheless catapulted herself toward Rheina.

Then the two of them disappeared off into the city, leaving a trail of carnage in their wake.

“Urgh...agh...”

Somehow, I managed to erect myself on one leg, and wandered the streets doing all in my power not to trip and fall. As I followed their trail, I saw the consequences of my failure as plain as day.

“M-m-mommyyy...”

Something that was once a child feasted on the still-living remains of her mother.

“I...I—I—I...I love...playing football...”

Something that was once a boy kicked about the severed head of his elder brother.

“...What have I done?” I muttered to myself. This wasn’t the work of Night Walker; it was Rheina. It was he who painted this portrait of hell, but the one who allowed him to do so...was me.

“Master! Rheina!”

I called out their names. I searched around every corner. And then, at last, I found them.

Rheina was in the main square at the center of town.

“It’s...strange. Everything...makes me so mad...I can’t help it...”

He slaughtered everything he saw, be it human or fiend.

“...I...”

My friend, laughing amid the consequences of his mindless massacre. As I considered the fact my own weakness brought this about, I lost the strength to stand.

“Ah, partner. There you are.”

Rheina turned to see me lying on the floor.

“Run awa—stay right there! I don’t want—I’m going to kill you!”

He began running toward me, swords drawn.

I couldn't move. I couldn't bring myself to do anything.

Just then...

"Stop this, Rheina!"

It was her. Master. She jumped in front of me.

And in the next moment...Rheina's blade sliced her clean in two.

"...Huh?"

The moment I made that pathetic sound, I heard a noise from Rheina's lips as well.

"Master..."

Looking down at her remains, he laughed.

"Ha! Haha! Hahahahaha! You...! If only you...had come sooner! M-my sister... would... Haha! Haha! Hah! Hah... Ahh...ahh... Aah... AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

He was crying. Crying with all his heart. At last, one half of his emotions had taken over. The only look on his face was one of grief.

He unfurled his white wings and spoke to me.

"Hey, partner."

He spoke those words I would never forget.

"Please."

My vow. My promise. My curse. Engraved upon my soul.

"The next time we meet. I need you...to kill me."



* * *

Then he flapped his great white wings and took off into the ashen sky. Fairly soon, there was no trace of him at all.

It was then I heard it.

“It’s all...my fault.”

“Master!”

A voice. From the bisected torso on the floor. I pulled my crippled body over to her. Her face was already as pale as bone, devoid of her usual spark.

She was no longer the Hero of Salvation. She was just a dying woman, lamenting the tragedy that had befallen her. Befallen all of us.

“Leon... Rheina... It’s all my fault...”

“No! It wasn’t you! It was me! I did this!”

I said it over and over and over again. But Master could not even fix her gaze on me. She just flapped her mouth wordlessly, like a fish.

“I’m sorry. I’m so, so, sorry. I’m so, so...”

A trickle of a tear ran down my cheek, staining me in my own regret.

My master. My mother.

I loved her. She was the most beautiful human in existence.

Yet she drew her last breath on the cold, dirty ground, like a discarded doll.

“...It’s not fair.”

I wept over her lifeless corpse.

I was filled with regret, remorse...and anger. Anger at my own weakness.

“Why couldn’t I do it?”

Memories swept into my mind. Memories of the days we spent together.

“From now on, your name is Leon Crossheart.”

The day they granted me my name, made from the two halves of their own.

It was supposed to symbolize our eternal bond.

“I’m glad I made you my apprentice, Leon.”

I remembered all the things they gave me. All the things I didn’t deserve. A name. A purpose. Emotion. A home.

And yet... And yet...

“You never loved those two at all.”

I heard Night Walker’s words echoing in my mind, and at that moment, something within me snapped.

“Ahh...ahhh...”

My whole body shook involuntarily.

But I shed no tears. None came. Even now, this pathetic ghoul was powerless to act.

“Ahh...ahhh...aaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!”

A tearless wail. There was no punishment more fitting than this. No punishment more deserved by this cowardly ghoul. To be denied even the solace of tears.

“Waaaaargh! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!”

I wailed. In the depths of my own personal hell, I wailed. In sadness...and in anger. A curse upon my sorry self.

What happened to your one and only Master? Your one and only brother? How could you let them both die?

How dare you tell them you’ll protect them? How dare you lie to them? Thanks to your selfish weakness, the two of them are no more.

You needed them. They were your world. They meant everything, and you meant nothing.

Why was it them and not you? What worth is there in your survival?

It should have been—

“It should have been me!!”

Heaving out those words, my eye was suddenly drawn to the holy sword, discarded on the floor. How easy it would be, I thought, to draw the blade across my throat and put an end to this nightmare. I didn't belong in this world anymore.

...However, I couldn't leave yet. To die here would result in only another betrayal.

“Rheina...”

My condemned friend. The friend I condemned. Wherever he now was, he was surely crying. Begging for me to come and kill him.

“...I cannot flee. Not now.”

Despite how desperately I craved the blade, I forced that desire aside. There was only one thing to do.

My brother.

My friend.

My Rheina.

“I have to save you...”

Beyond the distant mountain range, the setting sun descended.

Its dimming light a curtain falling to end my foolish dream.

A Shining Miracle and an End to Sadness

I had things I wanted to say.

Things I couldn't say.

Things I wanted to do. Things I couldn't do. Ways I couldn't help.

Many, many things.

Now I'm just drowning in a sea of contradictions.

I can't stay myself for very much longer.

I'd like to say just one thing before the end.

Hey, partner.

I really, really...

Beneath a perfectly clear blue sky, Rheinhardt Crossline took a deep breath.

"You know, as a child, we used to dream about this place."

He stood within District Two, a street lined with mansions for the rich and powerful, deep in the heart of the Holy City.

"Of course, part of me just wanted to make Remy happy... But another part of me hated what I was and what I had become. After my parents were suddenly taken from us, we had nowhere to live. We were penniless kids living on the streets, and somewhere inside, I always hated that."

His violet eyes, a fusion of the human and fiend within him, fixed on one of the houses.

"Even after my sister died, I never lost sight of that dream. So soon after becoming an adventurer, I bought this place. Maybe I just always wanted to see

what it was like to live in luxury. Settle the score. Break free of my troubled past and move on... It was a rite of passage for me. At least, that's how I thought of it at first."

As Rheinhardt called to mind his memory of those happy days, a smile spread across his lips.

"...It was fun, you know, living here with you. Messing around with you, making Master angry. At some point along the line, I started to think of this place as my home."

However, that memory, as valuable as gold, was not enough to erase the hatred polluting his heart. That was why Rheinhardt had come here. To see it all destroyed.

"...It's funny. Everything that seemed so precious to me back then...now looks dull."

Rheinhardt took a look around. It was like a scene straight out of hell. The citizens, transformed into ghouls, had lost themselves to violence, rape, and cannibalism.

Unending screams. Unending carnage. And yet up above, the sky had never looked so clear. Rheinhardt looked up at it, lost in memory.

"It's always been there. On the day my parents died. The day my sister died. The first day I made Master proud. And also—"

A bang. A gunshot. Ripping apart his thoughts. Tearing away the past.

He was here.

"...Do you remember, partner, how clear the sky was on the day we first met?"

The world meant nothing to him anymore. He no longer cared about this city or the people living in it who ruined his life. As far as he was concerned, there was only one other person here: the ghoul.

Violet met crimson. Crimson met violet. And neither could pull away from the other.

Leon was the same. No thoughts but those of his sworn brother. Four years.

Over a thousand days of constant torment. At the end of them all, he stood and he said,

“My old friend. I’ve come to make good on my promise.”

The wandering ghoul had stumbled at last to the finish line. To the place where all his sins would be counted. Leon’s eyes were dark as he neared the end, but there was no hesitation in them. His mind was set upon the path. The path to send his sworn brother’s soul to heaven. That was the only thing that kept him going all this time, through all the hardships and pain.

“Ha! Looks like you’re raring to go, partner. But first things first, wouldn’t you say? We can’t have our long-awaited rematch without a little prelude to get us all warmed up!”

Rheinhardt snapped his fingers, and as he did, hordes upon hordes of transfigured ghouls broke through the doors, walls, and windows. Rheinhardt had been busy.

Their numbers were in the many thousands at least. To fight them all would have been suicide for Leon...once upon a time. If he were still the scared, trembling puppy of his past, the wave would have engulfed and consumed him in an instant.

But he was not. And he was about to prove it.

As the crowd closed in, Leon extended both arms, as if unfurling a pair of wings.

“Arts of Steel, Deploy: Dual Expansion.”

The next moment, Leon’s arms both writhed and swelled, tearing away the sleeves of his coat.

Abominable Armament Number Three: *Slasher Bite*.

Usually, the technique created a serpent of blades that moved and acted autonomously. But this time, there were two of them: one forged from his right arm, and one from his left. Like a pair of deeply entwined familiars, the two

coiled, each a mirror image of the other, and devoured the hordes of hungry ghouls.

Naught remained but a vast pool of rot and a trove of Testament Stones, weakly gleaming.

“Huh. I guess my words really got through to you, partner. More than I ever expected.”

Leon’s arms reverted to their original forms. As he watched them do so, Rheinhardt smiled.

“So, you even cut off your other limbs? That’s quite the show of determination, eh, partner?”

Leon’s unique strength came at the price of the limbs he lost four years ago. His loss was the source of his power. And so, to defeat Rheinhardt, he had to give up everything he had.

He no longer hated himself, for there was nothing left to hate.

He could no longer be distracted, for he had abandoned all he cared about.

In both body and mind, Leon was now the perfect being.

“Okay, okay. That does it for the opening act, I think,” said Rheinhardt. “I can’t just sit on my ass after seeing that.”

He tightly grasped the steel blades in his hands.

“It’s been a while since we last had a bout, hasn’t it? Oh, it’s getting me all emotional. Still...”

Rheinhardt chuckled and flashed a carefree smile.

“The record stands at 1,288 wins, zero losses... Let’s make it 1,289!”

He lunged. His monstrous leg strength left deep gouges in the earth, tossing debris in his wake. By the time that debris began to fall, Rheinhardt was already up close, delivering a fiendish slice. His blade was so fierce, so precise, that the old Leon would have had no chance in hell of dodging it.

Leon’s left leg used to be so heavy that it impeded his movement, and this was the reason he always had to drag it behind him instead of running at full

speed. Because of that, he was often at a disadvantage in close-quarter combat.

However, now that he had cut off his other leg and replaced it with a similar prosthetic, all of that went out of the window. The burden once borne by a single leg was now split across two, and Leon had regained his old agility at last.

Leon leaped to the side as smoothly as silk, and the blade missed by the width of a single thread.

“Haha! I bet you’re glad I cut them off now, partner!”

Rheinhardt gave no quarter, even as his strike fell on thin air. All of a sudden, each of the clods of earth he had kicked up with his earlier lunge turned into blades. The strategy had been set out from the very beginning.

“Now, what happens if I aim for the spot where you’ll land, partner?”

Rheinhardt roared with exertion, and the hundreds of little blades shot toward Leon in great enough numbers that there seemed to be no end to them. They all aimed for the precise instant that Leon’s feet touched the ground, in the millisecond before he could take any further action. Any ordinary person would be turned into a pincushion, but Leon was far from ordinary.

“Activate Boosters.”

Though certain death awaited him only a few short moments down the line, Leon did not falter. He spoke, and his whole body responded. Part of his leg machinery unfolded, and metal cylinders burst out of the back of his coat. Then, just when the knives were mere moments from his skin, he spoke again.

“Accelerate.”

Superheated jet fuel spewed from the cylinders, launching Leon sideways without a moment’s delay. The knives stuck into the ground, where they turned back into earth and reunited with the ground.

“...Haha! Wow, partner, I didn’t think *you’d go that far*,” Rheinhardt laughed, a little astonishment mixed with a far greater amount of joy. “I can’t believe you remodeled your insides just for me!”

His violet eyes narrowed, as if he were able to see right through Leon’s skin and bones to perceive what lay within.

“Hmm, I see, I see,” he said. “Only your heart and a tiny bit of your skeleton is still natural. The rest has all been replaced. And even the bones that remain have been treated in some way. The weird pipe things sticking out of your back are proof of that.”

The angel smiled as he pointed out what the ghoul had done.

“What else? Oh, you’ve swapped out your intestines for a Source generator, I see. Every time you expend Source energy, that device infuses your body with more of the stuff. Or, more specifically...*with a concoction made from human meat and blood*, isn’t that right, partner?”

There was no reason to hide it. Leon gave a firm nod.

“Well, that stuff packs a real punch, I’ll not deny that. But I never thought you’d inject yourself with it! I thought you hated the stuff.”

He was right. Leon despised the thought of using a substance made from humans to enhance his performance. He always thought that if he stooped to such means, he would lose what little humanity he still possessed.

However, such fears meant nothing to Leon now.

“This is the end of the line,” he said. “It all ends here. I’m going to send you off to heaven, and then...”

Bearing both his own sin and that of his old friend, Leon would sink into hell.

That was why Leon had given it all up. Both living as a human and living as a fiend. He was nothing now but a man-shaped fighting machine.

“It’s time to end this. Time to end it all.”

Leon’s countenance was grim as he spoke those cold words...and this time, he was the one to take the initiative. He sped like a bolt toward his foe, who cast him a welcoming smile and said, “I don’t dislike the direct approach myself... but, well. It just makes me want to tease you a little, that’s all.”

Suddenly, pillars of ice appeared before Leon. Rheinhardt must have created them by freezing the moisture in the air. The next moment, they all shot forward to flatten him. Their speed was incredible, and given that Leon was hurtling toward them on rocket boosters, it seemed even faster from his

perspective. And yet...

“...Too slow.”

Through Leon’s eyes, the whole world seemed sluggish. That was because his eyes had been biomechanically enhanced. Not a single part of him was untouched. Leon was now able to artificially stimulate his nervous system, speeding up his visual perception and consequently making it seem as though all moving objects had slowed to a crawl.

When paired with the rocket boosters sticking out of every part of his body, Leon could leave the whole world behind.

“...Seriously?”

For the first time, Rheinhardt sounded worried. He had missed. He launched everything he could think of, from every angle, but to no avail.

Then, finally, Leon was here. Right underneath his nose.

“Got you.”

“Haha!”

Was that a triumphant laugh or a nervous one? Leon clenched his right fist, and Rheinhardt leaped backward, trying to avoid a decisive blow. However...

“Accelerate.”

As Rheinhardt widened the distance, Leon closed it. This was easily achievable with his jet boosters. In payback for Rheinhardt’s earlier trick, Leon aimed for the precise moment his foe was to land, and...

Shwf!

It was only a single punch, but given the power behind Leon’s mechanized arm, very few things in the world could stand up to it. Rheinhardt’s body was not one of those things. The blow landed in his torso, ripping skin and flesh and tearing the man in two.

No ordinary fiend could survive such an attack, but Rheinhardt was an Archfiend. From each segment of his body came strange tendrils that weaved together, attempting to restore his original form.

However, this was all within Leon's predictions.

"Arts of Steel, Deploy: *Full Duplex*."

Leon's brain was now little more than a computing core designed solely to execute his techniques. That meant he didn't even need to provide a full chant this time.

Abominable Arms, Number Four: *All For One*. Leon's ultimate move, now in stereo.

His arms and legs shifted, transformed, recombined, taking the shape of two enormous cannons. Then...

"Hey, c'mon. Gimme a break!"

Leon unleashed his most powerful shot yet. Rheinhardt's attention was caught up in trying to regenerate, and so he didn't have time to move out of the way. A radiant golden light engulfed everything, and when it dissipated, not a single trace of the angel remained.

"..."

It was over. For one, brief, moment, that was how it seemed.

"Man, talk about a close call!"

From right behind him, Leon heard the voice. He cracked a smile as he turned to see his old friend in perfect condition. Rheinhardt's immortality was such that he could regenerate his entire body from nothing. Yet Leon did not waver even for a moment.

"You'll need to do better than that to kill me."

"Only too happy to try."

That was only the beginning of Leon's relentless offensive.

"Arts of Steel: *Simultaneous Deployment*."

Leon's left arm initiated Abominable Armament Number Three. The writhing mass of blades threw Rheinhardt off balance, and that created an opening for Number Four, the toxic spear that pierced the angel's chest.

"Ugh?! U...gh... Hey! Poison's not fair! That hurts, you know! What's the point

if it's not gonna kill me? That's just torture! You're sick!"

A full-on direct assault didn't work and neither did an underhanded scheme. Was there no limit to Rheinhardt's immortal nature? Plus, exhaustion meant nothing to the angel. So long as there was anything nearby—liquid, solid, or gas—then he could maintain his ability for as long as he liked.

Leon, on the other hand, was already running out of time.

It's begun. My body is beginning to fall apart.

Though hidden by his coat, Leon could feel his abdominal muscles beginning to melt. He had just expended far more power than his ghoulish flesh could withstand. After his makeover, the energy he wielded was far beyond his capacity to control.

At this rate, I'll only last another ten minutes. But I can't back down now.

The plan was still proceeding as expected. Leon continued the fight, pushing Rheinhardt back through District Two, quite a distance from the mansion where the battle had first begun.

It's just around this next corner...!

The pair came out into a small square, crowded with people. Leading Rheinhardt here was the end goal of Leon's plan. In other words...

This was where it would all end.

As soon as the pair set foot inside, *they* sprung into action. Twenty-four temple knights, stout of arm, and the closest the church had to an army of full-blown heroes. They had hidden themselves down passages and inside buildings, chanting their spells in preparation for Leon's arrival.

"Burn in the Lord's name!"

From out of windows, from down avenues, the exact same chant echoed from two dozen pairs of lips. Two dozen sets of geometric patterns appeared in the air around Rheinhardt.

"...Huh."

That reaction was all he was able to accomplish before chains shot out of the

patterns, arresting his movement in an instant.

This was a Sacrament—one the Church guarded with jealous secrecy. It was the ultimate sealing spell, devised for the sole purpose of capturing any fiend and bringing it back alive. Even Rheinhardt couldn't escape from twenty-four separate instances of the spell...could he?

“...Well, this is a pickle.”

Rheinhardt couldn't even twitch a finger. Seeing this, Leon lunged.

It was time to go out in a blaze of glory.

Leon launched himself at Rheinhardt, concentrating on his own flank. Beneath his skin was a bomb Emilia had implanted. By channeling his Source into it, he could cause it to detonate, taking out his own life and hopefully Rheinhardt's in the process.

In just three more steps, he would be within range. Leon knew there was no coming out of this alive...but that didn't stop him. His mind was filled with thoughts of nothingness.

Two steps. Leon strode fluidly toward his goal.

One step. He cleared his mind of all distractions, his mental finger poised only upon the trigger.

Then, at last, he entered the bomb's effective range. He concentrated on his torso, and channeled—

“...E...r...”

Just then, he hesitated as a voice rang in his mind. A tiny, almost imperceptible pause. However, at the height of this critical battle, that opening was fatal.

“Well, this I didn't expect.”

Right at the height of that single instant, stretched out to an eternity, Rheinhardt blasted free of the twenty-four sets of chains that bound him.

Everything happened so fast, there was no time to even be surprised.

Leon felt something strange in his abdomen. Something sharp, cutting into him. It was the angel's wing; one of the three pairs sprouting from Rheinhardt's back. By the time Leon realized what was happening, it was already too late.

There was a blinding flash of white light. Leon found himself thrown to the ground, with no memory of what had just happened. All he could recall was the resplendent sight of the angel's six wings. Now he was on the verge of death, without even knowing how he got there.

Everything around him had vanished. A huge crater in the center of the Holy City, where nothing stood save for those two.

"Your plan was doomed the moment I set foot in this city," Rheinhardt declared, looking down upon the ghoul squirming at his feet. "As soon as this became an urban battle, the Church was left with only one way to respond. To deploy their ultimate weapon; namely, you. It was inevitable that you would prove the centerpiece of their plan to destroy me. It doesn't take much thinking to work out the rest."

This was it. One fatal misstep, and the Church's plan went up in smoke. There was nobody alive who could stop Rheinhardt now.

How did it come to this?

No answer came. Why had he faltered? It wasn't fear; Leon was ready to lay down his life, whatever happened. Then why?

...Even Rheinhardt had been surprised by his hesitation.

"I really thought that was the end, to be honest... But I didn't expect you to choke at the very last moment."

His lips curled up in a grin. A derisive, mocking grin.

"Can't say I blame you, though. Your crusade to kill me isn't the only thing that's grown stronger these past four years; your self-loathing has, too. It's no wonder you thought, at the last minute, *Is it really okay for a traitor like me to kill his best friend?*"

Perhaps Rheinhardt was right. It was Leon's fault his friend had turned out

this way, and even if killing him was the only way to save him, murder was still a sin.

“Your mission and your right are not the same thing, are they, partner?”

To kill Rheinhardt, and thereby preserve his honor—that was the mission Leon had set for himself. But did he have the right to do that? After all, it was he who created Rheinhardt in the first place.

This was a question Leon had asked himself every day for the past four years, and never had he reached an answer. Perhaps that was why things had turned out this way.

“You just wanted forgiveness. You thought that by saving me, you could write your own sin off the books. That’s all you cared about.”

Rheinhardt kept talking, his voice now devoid of any passion whatsoever.

“Don’t kid yourself. You didn’t take your sadness and put it toward a righteous cause. All you’ve ever wanted is for me to put an end to the guilt.”

Leon could barely withstand the cold, affectionless glare coming from his friend—his brother. But Rheinhardt didn’t let up.

“You’re selfish,” he spat. “All you ever think about is yourself. The reason you wanted to kill me wasn’t atonement; it was masturbation. You never cared about saving me or any of that shit.”

A sword appeared in Rheinhardt’s hand. But he wasn’t going to bring it down yet. First came the sword of words.

“I’m ashamed I ever thought of you as my brother.”

Leon could no longer move a muscle. He didn’t deserve to be a savior, nor to be forgiven. Not ever since he let the two of them die that day. There was only one thing he could do for Rheinhardt, and that was to hope his own death brought some small measure of satisfaction to his friend’s furious heart.

“Now then, partner.”

Leon closed his eyes. He was fully at peace with whatever happened next. He heard the sound of parting air as Rheinhardt's sword began to swing. Not long now...

"You really are a handful, new kid."

"I don't mind children who take a bit more work. It's cuter that way."

At the moment of his impending death, Leon saw his life flash before his eyes. So this was what that was like. Right up until the end, God was intent on tormenting him.

"I'm only gonna say this once, partner... Thanks."

"Tee-hee. Isn't that cute? When's the last time we saw Rheina smile like that, I wonder?"

It was happy. They were happy. Happy times, happy memories.

And Leon destroyed them. He turned those happy memories into painful ones.

At least by dying, he thought he could consign all that pain to nothingness. But God wasn't willing to let Leon off the hook that easily.

"Who cares what other people think of you?"

"Rheina's right, Leon. You're not just a ghoul anymore. You're family."

Stop it.

Please, stop it.

Just...

Just kill me ahead—

"T...e...r."

...A voice.

Someone's voice, ringing in his mind.

At first, it was so quiet, he could barely make out the words. But it grew and grew until it blotted out Leon's reminiscing completely, eliminating his longing for death.

For that voice was none other than...

"Master!"

Alice. Alice Campbell.

Her voice. Her smile. Memories he thought he had thrown away, rewriting his past before his very eyes.

"I came because I..."

"I don't care about your life story."

At first, she had just been trouble. Someone to be rid of as soon as possible. But then...

"...You'll get blood on you."

"I don't mind."

There wasn't anybody else like her. She was a ray of light in the darkness. A light Leon could do without, he thought. As far as he was concerned, the two needed to stay far away from each other, but he never asked how she felt about it.

"Don't just throw me away!"

In some ways, she was his sin made manifest. To her, Leon was both the man who saved her life and the man who killed her mother. Perhaps it would have been better if Leon had died alongside his target that day.

But then Alice came into his life, and with her, a new way for Leon to atone: to do what her mother no longer could and make the girl happy. Leon devoted himself to that excuse.

His life had never been more peaceful than the days after he accepted his own weakness. For the first time in so long...

...Yes. I see. That's why I...

Once he realized it, he heard the voices again.

"L-Leon is not a monster!"

"I won't leave you. Ever."

"I was nothing but a burden once again, wasn't I, Master?"

"I...I want...to fix you, Leon."

All he could think about was her.

"I...want to live."

At last, this foolish ghoul realized the truth. The real reason he had failed to blow himself up moments ago.

He hadn't thrown it all away. He couldn't.

Alice. His affection for her. His fixation. His love.

He couldn't save his fellow apprentice because he still had hope. And its name was Alice Campbell.

"I don't want to die. I don't. I want to live."

Leon begged. Begged for his life. It wasn't shameful or disgusting. It was proof she was important to him. With his family's death, Leon felt as though he had woken from a dream he could never regain, but he was wrong. He had entered another one without even realizing it. A dream called Alice.

"I still want to live!"

He wanted to live with her. Watch what she became. Watch what she did.

He wanted to see her smile.

Leon didn't care if he didn't deserve it. To him, Alice was... She was...

"Nice, partner, very nice."

Rheinhardt's voice was dripping with glee.

“I didn’t want to kill you, you know... Not like that, at least.”

His smirk twisted into a revolting grin.

“I always wanted you to beg for your life. Thanks for making it come true!”

The blade loomed. His death loomed. Leon had no means to defy it.

But just then...

“MAAAASTEEEEEEEEER!”

A shout.

That voice...was no delusion. It was hers.

“...Alice.”

As he answered, a cutting sound reached his ears. Its source: a swiftly flying arrow, white as snow. It screamed through the air, piercing Rheinhardt’s sword arm and flinging the weapon aside at the very last second.

“...Hey. What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” muttered Rheinhardt with unconcealed rage. But the source of his anger was not Leon’s stay of execution. Leon followed the angel’s gaze, and there he saw it.

A small figure was hurtling this way, whom Leon could only assume was Alice. The reason for his uncertainty was that she was clad from head to toe in *crimson armor*.

Leon recognized it at once. It was the very same plate that his own master once wore. After Claire’s death, Leon gave it to Emilia, claiming he had no right to use it.

“You scum! That’s hers!”

Closer, closer, closer. Alice sprinted toward Rheinhardt, changing her bow into twin blades. Then, just at the moment she entered melee range...

“That belongs to Master! Get your dirty hands off it!”

His anger exploded into violent fury. A pair of swords appeared, one in his

newly regenerated right arm and another silver one in his left. His wild and careless slashes were still leagues beyond what any normal adventurer would be capable of dodging. And despite wearing the armor of the previous Hero of Salvation...or perhaps because of it, Alice seemed doomed to meet the same fate as Claire four years ago.

However, at that moment...

“You! Big! Idiooooooooooot!”

Alice yelled and flung herself aside with a tempestuous speed no one was expecting. The blade headed her way passed her by without injury, and in one swift counterattack, Alice sliced off both of Rheinhardt’s arms at the shoulders.

“Tch...!”

Rheinhardt scowled. For once, he seemed truly angry. But Alice wasted no time in running past him.

“Master!”



She scooped up the wounded Leon in her arms and dashed off without even slowing down. Rheinhardt stood no chance of catching up to her. Instead, he shouted, “I’ll freakin’ kill her!”

He glared after her, his violet eyes staring daggers into the girl’s back. But on his face, he wore a smile. The snarl of a growling beast, perhaps. Or...

Maybe some small part of him still felt joy.



Alice sprinted all the way back to Emilia’s workshop with Leon in her arms. However, she found it completely deserted, with the forge mistress nowhere to be found. Alice laid her master down on the bed, then fell to one knee, grunting.

“Urgh...grgh...”

Her crimson armor dissipated into motes of light...and reassembled into a bracelet around her left wrist.

“Haah...haah...urgh!”

Blood spilled from her lips and clogged her throat. Leon looked at her, and somewhere in her pitiful appearance was a spark of warmth.

“I didn’t think you’d go so far,” he said.

Using custom equipment designed for someone else was a serious affair. Especially when that equipment belonged to Claire, one of the most hardy and resilient adventurers to ever walk the realm. No ordinary person could even walk in it, much less run and fight as Alice had done.

He was impressed, but his words came more from a place of concern than anything else. Still, it was Leon’s own fault that she had needed to rush in and save him, so he couldn’t much complain. Instead, he asked her a question.

“...Did Emilia give you that? The bracelet.”

Alice was too weary to speak and only managed a nod.

I guess I misread that woman, Leon thought to himself. I thought she was planning on keeping Alice safe. Perhaps she saw a bit of herself in the girl. Perhaps the bracelet was a mercy, to let her die alongside her master. Or perhaps...she was hoping Alice could show us all a different path.

“Pheew...”

While Leon still tried to figure out what it all meant, Alice let out a deep, long breath, and rose to her feet. She walked across the workshop to a crate at one end and pulled out a leather bag. It contained Leon’s Source reserves, used to replenish his own supply. “This’ll sting,” she said as she produced a needle from the bag and stuck it into Leon’s skin. Soon, the ghoul found his energy returning, and his superhuman regeneration kicked in, closing his wounds.

After seeing that her master was fully healed, Alice collapsed.

“Hrh...!”

Leon leaped out of bed and caught her in his arms.

“Master,” she said, “Do you remember what I swore to you in the Kin-Eater Village?”

Leon answered. “You said that one day you’d be the one protecting me.”

“Yes... I may have cheated a little, but I kept my promise, didn’t I, Master?”

She managed a weak smile. Leon had to let her know how he felt.

“You did a great job, Alice. I’m truly proud of you.”

“Ehehehehe...”

Leon couldn’t help but be charmed by her smile as he held her in his arms and patted her head.

“There’s just no separating us, is there?”

Alice nodded.

“You said this was the end of us, Master... But that’s not true, is it? Our story is only just beginning.”

Her smile was tinged with sadness. As she went on, she stared into the ghoul’s crimson eyes.

“I want you to see who I’ll become. And I want to see who you’ll become. I still have a dream I want us to fulfill together. So, Master, this isn’t the end. It’s only the beginning.”

For once, Leon said nothing to deter her. For the first time, he felt exactly the same way.

“I thought I threw everything away,” he said. “I thought I could keep my promise at last. But no matter how hard I tried...I couldn’t forget you.”

Alice smiled. “Even if you had forgotten me, I wouldn’t ever leave you, Master.”

Alice’s words left a deep impression. Leon closed his eyes and spoke.

“...Let’s take down Rheina. Together.”

Alice nodded. But there was doubt in her eyes. After all, why not run away together? Leon shook his head and said, “We have three choices. We take refuge in the emergency shelter, we leave the city, or we stand and fight. Let me explain why we have to pick the third.”

Alice stared right into Leon’s eyes, listening to him speak.

“First, the underground shelter. We can hide out there until things blow over. However, that’s not a smart move. If we leave Rheina unchecked, he’ll find us sooner or later. When that happens, we’ll have to fight him anyway.”

It wasn’t hard to imagine. Both Alice and Leon could see that any solution along these lines would be fleeting at best.

“We stand no chance if we fight him underground. All the panicked townspeople will be there, and it’ll be chaos. The only possible outcome is tragic death, not just for us, but for everyone else as well.”

And so one option was struck off the list.

“Second, fleeing the city. This is another bad idea. Even if we manage to escape, I’ll be a wanted man for abandoning my duty and betraying the church. They’ll be after me, and once Rheina’s finished destroying the Holy City, he will too. All we’ll have succeeded in doing is making ourselves another enemy.”

And so the second option was eliminated as well, leaving only one.

“We fight Rheina here. It’s the only way to secure our future. In order to look ahead, we have to stop looking to the past. We’re only ever going to be happy if we can pass this trial. At least, that’s what I think.”

He glanced at Alice, as if to say, “*What about you?*” but the girl said nothing. Instead, she asked, “So, how are we going to do this?”

“One thing before I get to that. Let me ask you a question... What did you do with the holy sword?”

Leon had placed it on Alice’s unconscious body the last time they spoke. But now Leon could see it nowhere on her person.

“Um, about that... When I woke up, I found a note.”

“What?”

“Yes, from Emilia. I think it said something like... *Have this bracelet. Save Leon, or don’t, see if I care. I’m taking the sword, though. Have fun being dead together.*”

“Right. I guess that makes sense. The sword means a great deal to her, after all. She couldn’t risk it being lost, especially knowing you’d almost certainly go running after me once you woke up.”

Still, the sword possessed a will of its own. If it had wanted to take part in the battle, it could have done so with or without Emilia’s permission. Did that mean the sword had turned its back on them?

“Either way, we can’t expect Calit Gelius to solve our problems for us,” said Leon.

“Couldn’t we meet up with Emilia and ask for it back?” asked Alice.

“Rheina will get to us before that happens,” Leon replied. “He may be after the sword as well. We should expect to run into him if we go after it.”

The sword could have made a formidable ally in the upcoming battle, but it seemed it was not to be.

“The point is, we have to deal with Rheina one way or another. As for how to do that...”

Leon walked over to a corner of the workshop and began rummaging around in a toolbox. Retrieving something from it, he breathed a sigh of relief.

“Phew. I was wondering what to do if Emilia hadn’t left this.”

“Maybe she knew you would need it?” offered Alice.

“Knew? I doubt it. Hoped, maybe.”

Emilia’s last hope. Leon secured it in his waist pouch, then turned to Alice.

“There are only two possible outcomes to this plan. Either we live together or we die together.”

Alice could see the question in his eyes. *“Are you ready?”*

“Let’s go,” she said with a smile and a nod. “Together.”

A story that continued long after the curtains fell. A future unattainable alone. Alice looked at Leon, her eyes brimming with hope.

“Yeah,” he replied. And then, “Let’s do this, Alice.”

“Yes, Master.”

The pair left the workshop, walked through the weapons store, and exited onto the street.

Unbreakable. The name seemed extra poignant today.

Why Emilia named the store that way was now lost to time. Yet as the two walked side by side, Leon thought of Alice.

He would protect her. At all costs.



“Huh. Well, what should I do now? Decisions, decisions...”

Rheinhardt had flown into a rage after Alice escaped with Leon. Every building in the vicinity became a target for his anger, and when he finally calmed down, he sat atop the rubble and thought to himself.

“Option one: Track them down and kill them. Ooor, option two: Go find Emilia

and take the sword off her. What should I do?”

Leon hadn't been carrying it when the two fought. Nor had that girl. Which meant that it was reasonable to assume he handed it off to Emilia.

The sword was a relic of his Master. Becoming a fiend had not dulled his attachment; if anything, he was more obsessed than ever with getting it back.

“Hmm, I guess I gotta go get it. Killing those two can wait.”

As if to strengthen that decision, a new idea formed in his mind.

“Imagine their faces when I bring them her freshly severed head.”

His decision made up, Rheinhardt spread his three sets of wings and took off into the sky. The city below was like a portrait of hell itself. The townspeople who had turned into ghouls attacked the others, turning them as well. Mothers ate their children, men slew their lovers, their eyes streaked with tears as brothers and sisters feasted on human flesh. Rheinhardt cracked a grin at the sight. Then...

“Hm? What's this?”

A single tear descended from his violet eye.

“How odd,” he said. “I didn't think the wind was that—”

Partway through his sentence, a pure white arrow struck and pierced one of his six wings, rendering it useless. However, the angel could simply grow it back with little effort. He paused in the air for a moment.

“Well, far be it from me to refuse Cupid's arrow. Perhaps a change of plan is in order.”

Rheinhardt's smile was murderous as he dived toward the ground, landing in the middle of the street before his two nemeses. The road was completely free of ghouls—save Leon, of course. Claire's disciple must have been hard at work, aided by the nosy girl at his side.

The angel first looked to his former ally and sneered.

“Hah. Thought you liked 'em a bit older than that. That girl of yours must be quite the smooth talker. Burrowed her way into your rotten heart, has she?”

There was no trace of self-destruction in Leon's crimson eyes now. Quite the opposite, in fact. A fierce determination to survive and to live out his days with the girl by his side.

"Well, partner, I, for one, welcome the change. It'll make it that much more satisfying to kill the both of you."

There was evil in the angel's violet eyes. But Leon could not back down now. Nor could his apprentice.

"Not on my life! It shall be you who falls this day!" Alice yelled as the crimson bracelet on her wrist began to glow. In the blink of an eye, she was clad in full plate metal once more.

"Ahh, jeez. Didn't I warn you about that? ...I thought I said to get your damn hands off her things!"

Rheinhardt's simmering anger bubbled over and erupted into full-blown fury. Red-faced, he flew into battle. Alice stepped forward while Leon fell back. Rheinhardt, meanwhile, took the initiative.

"Piss off, bitch!"

The angel spread his six wings, scattering snow-white feathers. As soon as Alice got near to them, there was a blinding white flash and burst of heat. So, this was the attack he used right after Leon failed to blow himself up—the one that took out the entire area along with twenty-four of the church's best men. It worked by transmuting the feathers into powerful explosives and detonating them. The resulting explosion could flatten a city block if deployed over a large enough area, and when brought to bear against a single target, the blast could be devastating.

This time, Rheinhardt was opting for the latter strategy. Decreasing the area of effect in order to obtain a comparative increase in power. The heat energy alone would be enough to atomize anything caught in its path.

Discounting, of course, the armor Alice was wearing. The suit that once belonged to the legendary hero, Claire Redheart, and that only she was capable of utilizing to its fullest potential. This impregnable feat of smithery could weather any blow, even an angel's divine might.

As the smoke cleared, it gave way to a glimmering pair of eyes. Then...

“Roaaaaaaaaaagh!”

A scream cut through the dusty veil. The battle cry of Alice Campbell. Transforming her pure-white bow into its twin-blade form, she launched herself at the enemy.

“Haaaah!”

Alongside Alice’s yell came a movement so swiftly executed, it was impossible for Rheinhardt to dodge. By the time he realized she was close, his body was already divided into seven.

“Tch!”

Regenerating swiftly, he took off into the air. From there, he hoped to unleash an aerial bombardment that left no room for a counterattack.

“Yaaaah!”

With explosive speed, Alice turned her weapon back into a bow and let off a glimmering volley, aided by the accelerative abilities of the crimson armor. All in all, close to fifty arrows shot toward Rheinhardt...

“Nrh...!”

...and peppered the angel, filling him full of holes.

Rheinhardt never even got an attack in. Despite his potent transmutation and regeneration abilities, the angel had one weakness: a low level of physical ability. In this respect, he was even weaker than the Ogre fought at Karna Village.

“Raaaah!”

This shortcoming gave rise to Alice’s strategy: A full-on assault, leaving no time to strike back. Even if Rheinhardt saw the attacks coming...

“Dammit! That’s not fair, you rotten ghoul!”

...Leon prevented him from fighting back. He stood at a distance, providing supporting fire with his handgun. Rheinhardt was only slightly more resilient than the average human, and a bullet worked just as well on him as it did on

anyone else.

While Alice kept up her fierce assault, Leon assisted from behind. Their aims were as one, namely...

“Grr...! You’re trying to run me out of Source, aren’t you, partner?!”

Whether human or monstrous in nature, all supernatural powers required the Source. Even Rheinhardt’s abilities were useless without it.

“You sly dog! That’s the same trick you pulled back in Regtelia Town!”

And it was a solid plan. Rheinhardt was nigh immortal with his regenerative powers, but they couldn’t keep going forever. Once his Source was drained, he was as killable as anyone.

And the act of regenerating cost Source. So by keeping up the assault, Rheinhardt would eventually run dry. However...

“That’s only if I don’t kill you before that happens!”

Rheinhardt’s expression slowly reverted to a smile. And just then...

“Krh...hrh...!”

A grunt of pain emerged from Alice’s lips, and she stopped. She had been fighting at her limit ever since the battle began, and she could go no longer. All that yelling as she dueled the angel was not to showcase her fighting spirit; it was to disguise her screams of agony.

“That armor was made by Emilia for Master and for Master alone. You can’t use it, do you understand me? You can’t.”

Rheinhardt looked down from the sky at the fallen Alice, a shrewd grin on his lips.

“You know, while you were kicking the shit out of me, I thought of something. A way to make the two of you suffer!”

He darted toward the ground, wearing a sadistic smile. Heading not for Alice but for Leon.

“Time to end this, partner!”

Leon’s death would be devastating for Alice. The guilt would crush her. And

Leon would be forced to watch his beloved disciple’s despair-ridden face as Rheinhardt’s blades sent him to hell. It was the most tragic ending imaginable to the pair’s tale, but to the angel, it was hard to think of anything more satisfying.

“Master!”

Her scream was truly awful; heartrending. Even Rheinhardt was convinced... and so he didn’t realize he’d been tricked until it was all over.

The angel swooped toward his old friend and materialized a sword in his outstretched hand. With it, he sliced Leon clean in two. Not instantly fatal for the ghoul, but enough that death would soon follow. Between Alice’s look of horror and Leon’s look of shock, Rheinhardt smiled. It was only in the next moment that all his expectations got turned on their head.

For the body of the ghoul began to fade, giving way to a single roll of paper.

“What?! A scroll?!”

Now, at last, he realized the duo’s aim. It wasn’t to deplete him of Source energy at all. It was all to lead him to this moment: a single millisecond of triumph, wherein the angel would let down his guard.

And from the side, an attack came. Right on cue, at the most perfect possible moment.

“Rest well, old friend.”

Leon Crossheart was there. Hiding in a dark alley leading off the main street, tossing an item small enough to fit in the palm of his hand.

“A bomb—!”

Rheinhardt’s eyes flew open at the very moment Leon’s bullet pierced the device.



Those who lived in the far east were known to cremate their dead. Consigning the body to flame was thought to allow the soul to escape into heaven. Leon thought of that as he watched the towering inferno before him. The tight

cylinder of fire stretched up and up into the clear blue sky, seemingly without end. Leon spared a word of prayer for his partner's soul.

“...It's over. It's all over.”

The explosive device Emilia created in order to defeat Rheinhardt did two things. It released an enormous amount of heat, and it also set up a barrier to trap all that heat inside.

After the events of four years ago, Leon had learned everything there was to know about his old friend. His abilities...and his weaknesses.

Rheinhardt's twin powers were matter reconstruction and control. They bordered on unfair, allowing Rheinhardt to conjure up a wide variety of effects. No matter the substance, the angel could bend it to his whim...but it was not unbeatable.

As with all supernatural abilities, it required Source energy to function, but there was another, less obvious drawback: It required something to control in the first place. With that in mind, Leon came up with a way to kill the angel for good.

First, create a vacuum completely absent of matter. Then trap the angel within it, and finally, use an intense heat to burn him to ash. This was the theory that ultimately led to the creation of Emilia's bomb, which used Sacraments to produce the vacuum, contain the target, and burn it with fire.

Two of these bombs were made. The first was sewn into Leon's flesh, while it was agreed the second would be left in Emilia's workshop, in case the initial plan should fail.

“How ironic that the Church's order is what saved me.”

The two bombs were built with different triggering mechanisms. The first could only be triggered by the bearer, while the second came with a remote control. This was at the insistence of the Church; while they had no objections to Leon blowing himself up, they couldn't allow innocent *human* life to be sacrificed in the same way.

Anyway, it was over. At long last, it was all over. Leon cast his eyes skyward, as if hoping to see his brother's soul one last time as it departed for paradise.

“...Rheina,” he said. “I was willing to take your hate and consign it to the soil alongside myself... But I can’t. I have her now. I’m sorry.”

When his time came, Leon would gladly bare his sin before the Lord, but that time was far off yet.

He heard Alice’s voice.

“We...we did it, didn’t we, Master? Now...we can...”

Leon turned to see his disciple sprawled out on the floor, groaning in pain. The crimson suit of armor had vanished, and Leon hypothesized that if she had worn it a minute longer, she would not have survived.

“You did well, Alice.”

To be honest, Leon would have preferred to have helped for real, without resorting to the scroll of illusion, but he was simply too beat-up to be of any use. It pained him to leave all the fighting to Alice, but there was no other choice. The least he could do was show his appreciation, and with that, he turned his back on the pillar of flame, leaving it with only these words:

“I’m looking ahead, Rheina. I have a new life now with her. I’m sorry if you can’t accept that.”

His mind felt lighter, like a huge burden had been lifted.

The temple knights and adventurers in the city would be able to handle the remaining ghouls.

“Maybe when this is all over, I’ll take her out for dinner. I suppose I can afford to treat her after what she’s done. It’d be great if Emilia could join us...but perhaps that’s asking too much.”

When Leon thought of the future, his heart filled with warmth. He never thought he’d learn how to enjoy life again. It was Alice who taught him that. She was his light, his life, his—

“What, you think this is over?” came a sneering voice.

Leon looked down, where a silver streak of light had just pierced his torso.

“Rgh...?!”

The mask fell from his face and clattered to the ground, just before Leon himself slumped over onto the cold, hard earth.

“Master!” came his pupil’s scream. She turned, but as much as she wanted to run over to him, she could not. Terror rooted her to the spot, unable to move. Unable to do anything but watch her worst nightmare unfold.

“That was unexpected,” said the angel, in defiance of the burning pillar of flame that should have just scorched him to ash.

“I really thought I was about to snuff it there. I haven’t felt so dead since, oh... four years ago?”

He was alive. Rheinhardt was still alive. There wasn’t a single mark anywhere on him.

“Man, I really messed up. It’s not like I don’t know the limitations of my own power, it’s just...well, you know what happens, partner. I get all excited, and it’s like my brain switches off. You almost had me for a moment!”

Rheinhardt wore a triumphant smile as he stood over Leon, basking in his victory.

“But, you know, it was the damndest thing... So there I was, about to be burned to death, when I thought, *Hey, I wonder if I could use this heat energy to fuel my powers.* Never once tried it before, but it’s like Master always said: *‘Don’t give up, and keep moving forward, because you never know what you’re capable of until the moment of truth.’* And you know what, partner? Turns out she was damn right!”

The angel had managed to evolve his dark powers at the very last moment. Rheinhardt Crossline. He was truly unlike any other fiend Leon had ever faced.

“Now, then,” he said, turning his violet eyes on Leon’s beloved apprentice. “Let’s start with you.”

“N...no, don’t...!”

Leon could barely even speak. The hole in his torso was so large that Leon

knew...

...he was not long for this world.

He was healing it as best he could with his regenerative powers, but they wouldn't be enough to finish the job. This wound was beyond his ability.

And so...Leon Crossheart would soon die. A permanent end to a sorry tale.

"M-Master...!"

In her face, in her eyes, in her voice, there was only love.

She needed to run. She needed to live at all costs. Leon knew that soon he would meet a miserable end, but he could think of nothing else.

"Aww, what a heartwarming relationship," said the angel. "Excuse me while I throw up."

No.

Stop.

Don't hurt her.

Do what you want to me, but don't hurt her.

"Rhei...na!"

He couldn't move a single muscle. He was going to die. She was going to die. Alice, his disciple. His love.

"Time to give up, partner. There's only one thing you can do, and that's lie there and die as I break your pretty little doll."

His mind felt weak. There wasn't long left. Leon bore the weight of his heavy lids as every last emotion was stripped away from him. All the regrets. All the fear. All his motivation to do something, anything. And finally, his love.

Ah, so this is death.

All that remained in Leon's heart after the Reaper stole everything away...was despair. There was nothing he could do. Nothing to escape his fate. He could only wait for the darkness to claim him.

Only wait...

“Now, **‘No!’** how should **‘Stop!’** I kill you?”

But just as Leon accepted his lot, he heard something very strange.

“Perhaps I ought **‘I can’t move.’** to test out my **‘Can’t move’** new power. Make **‘a single’** something of an **‘muscle’** art exhibition of you.”

Another voice was mixed in with the angel’s.

“Hey, part—**‘I can’t give up.’** How do **‘I can’t let this be the end.’** want to die?”

Gradually, the voice became stronger, replacing the angel’s own speech.

“Not **‘I swore an oath.’** I **‘On my sister’s grave.’** care. **‘To make her dreams come true.’”**

It was the voice of his old friend, crying out.

“So why can’t I do anything?!”

Some small part of Rheinhardt was still in there, a light shining in the darkness.

“Make it stop! Make it stop! Make it stop! Please! Stop!”

He was crying. Weeping for the violence his body had wrought.

“It’s no use. I can’t stop it. I’m not...strong enough.”

Leon felt his brother’s grief. His brother’s pain.

“Please, partner. Please.”

“You have to help me!”

Rheinhardt’s plea pierced the innermost confines of Leon’s mind. And where the body failed, the mind prevailed.

“Urgh...rrgh...rrraaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!”

Already he could feel himself melting away, but it barely registered. His

friend, his brother, was crying out for help, and what kind of man could let such a call go unanswered? Reality was powerless to stop him from taking the hand Leon had forsaken all those years ago.

“Rhei...NAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

He grabbed his gun. He pulled the trigger. He fired.

The recoil broke his arm, but that wasn’t enough to stop Leon. He held the gun in place through sheer force of will. He fired a second shot. A third. A fourth.

“I won’t let you have her...!”

His future. Leon’s hope shattered his despair.

“Rheina! I swear to you...!”

His past. Leon’s grief overpowered his fear.

And in that moment, Leon Crossheart finally learned what courage meant.

“...No matter how much you break me, I will never give up on salvation!”

His red-hot emotions brought with them immense power. Infinite courage running through his veins. All the despair from the past four years, all the hope from looking to the future, all those threads converged here, at this very moment.

“...Well now, what’s this?”

Leon couldn’t hear the voice of his friend anymore. But he was still there, waiting to be saved.

“Still up for a fight, are you?” the angel grinned. “Oh, I’ve never seen you look so pathetic.”

He had to free the real Rheinhardt. Leon’s friend. His brother. At all costs. Even if it was an unwinnable fight.

“I’ve changed my mind, partner. I’ll start with you instead.”

He had to save them both. His friend. His pupil.

Only then could he live the dream he once threw away. The dream called

Alice.

He needed to live. Both for the new, and for the old. And for that, he needed to deliver salvation.

“Ha! Well, you’ve got enthusiasm, partner. I’ll give you that. But I’m afraid it’s not going to do you any good at all.”

Leon looked up as the angel adopted a stance to finish him off, gathering light and converting it into heat.

Leon was sure his death was imminent. He would die without ever making up for his mistakes.

...But so what?

Abandonment, fear, despair, all of it was gone.

There was only courage and determination.

He would never give up.

But as if to ridicule the mere thought, the angel sneered.

“See you on the other side, partner.”

He fired his light, the light of apocalypse.

And at that moment, it descended from the heavens, like a jet-black bolt of lightning.

It landed between Rheinhardt and Leon, taking the beam meant for the ghoul. The light scattered and vanished, dissipating into the air with no effect.

“...Hey, what the hell is this?”

From Rheinhardt’s lips came a troubled voice, as the onyx scabbard of Calit Gelius flew over to Leon. It glowed with a radiant light, completely healing Leon’s wounds before his very eyes.

“...I see. Somehow I always knew it was you.”

When he saw the sword, Leon finally realized just who had been watching

over him all this time. Calit Gelius possessed a mind of its own. And now Leon knew just whose mind that was.

“Ugh,” spat the angel. “So that’s how it’s going to be? Now the sword’s betraying me?”

No. This was no betrayal.

She came to save her two disciples, just as she had done many times before. If she had betrayed anyone, it was her only remaining relative.

“Emilia’s not going to like this, you know,” said Leon. “Some big sister you are.”

The sword remained silent, but Leon felt as though he could feel his teacher’s embarrassed smile somewhere within it.

And then, he heard a voice.

Courage comes from a burning heart, Leon.

You never had anything to fuel it with before.

You were just a little kid who depended on us for everything.

But you do now, don’t you? Now you know what courage is.

Now you’re ready to be my successor.

Take it. Take hold of your life, Leon.

The sword offered its hilt. As Leon held it, he felt warmth flowing through his arm, into his mind.

“...I thought I was all alone again in this hopeless world. To live alone and to die alone. That was all I wanted. All I thought I deserved. But...”

That couldn’t have been further from the truth.

Leon was never alone.

For she had always been by his side.

“You were watching over me all this time, weren’t you? ...Master.”

And then, he heard the sword’s voice again. Her voice. Claire Redheart’s.

“Get ready, Leon. It’s time to save our family. That means Rheina...and Alice, too.”

Leon wrapped his fingers around the hilt. It was the moment his entire life had been leading up to. He slid the weapon free of its sheath.

There were two blinding flashes of light.

The first came from Rheinhardt. Driven furious by the sword’s actions, he crafted millions of tiny balls of heat out of the sheer vacuum and launched them at Leon.

The second was the glint of Calit Gelius as the blade was exposed to the world outside its sheath. It engulfed and obliterated the incoming projectiles.

“Argh! Goddammit! You’re really pissing me off! See, this is what I always hated about you!”

It was like Rheinhardt had completely forgotten about Alice, lying at his feet. His eyes remained fixed on Leon...and at the spectral image of Claire standing beside him. The two members of his family.

Leon glared back at the suffering of his old friend trapped deep within the angel’s flesh, and said, “Master! Lend me your strength! The strength of protection! The strength of salvation!”

He lunged. Head-on. No tricks, no schemes. Only the courage and determination that burned inside his heart and a desire to save the two that mattered most to him.

“You idiot!” screeched the angel. “Are you really in such a hurry to die?!” He conjured up a stream of projectiles that surrounded Leon before all descending inward from every direction at once.

It was impossible to dodge and impossible to block. There was no way out.

But Leon was a hero now. And a hero never gave up, whether things were possible or not.

“Be not afraid, my child. I shall cut a path.”

Leon felt her warmth in his heart, as the sword let out a glimmer of light that eliminated the projectiles, just as it had a moment ago.

Stunned by the replication of this miracle, the angel grew enraged.

“Tch!”

A blade of steel manifested in each hand, and Rheinhardt gripped the hilts so hard, it seemed they would break.

“Need I remind you?!” he bellowed. “You’ve never won a match against me in your sorry little life!”

The two closed into melee combat. The angel’s deft swing aimed to take Leon’s head. The ghoul dodged. Immediately after, a slash to his flank. Leon caught it on his blade.

And then...

...Rheinhardt’s last gambit, a silent assassin, approached Leon from behind. It was one final projectile, a gleaming ball of light that was otherwise completely undetectable. It was the perfect sneak attack with no way to dodge or prevent its approach.

But although Leon may not have known of its presence, the sword did. And it would not allow the attack to go through. The blade produced a flash of light that eliminated the underhanded projectile.

“Rgh?!”

That slight moment of shock was enough for Leon to take advantage of. With a sharp exhale of breath, he swung the holy sword.

There was no time for the angel to react. His right arm was sliced clean off.

“Nrgh...!”

He couldn’t regenerate. He couldn’t even activate his ability. The holy sword possessed two abilities: that of creation and that of destruction. Anything damaged by it could never be recreated unless the sword willed it. No matter how capable the angel’s power of regeneration, he could never get his right

arm back.

“Dammit...! Damn you!”

Rheinhardt’s fury manifested in a frenzied assault. Despite his missing limb, his strikes packed no less punch nor lacked finesse. His talent with the sword was one of the few remaining vestiges of his humanity, and it proved a serious challenge to Leon’s edge in the fight.

“Her soul dwells within that sword! That’s the power of Calit Gelius!”

He raged and raged, unleashing a ferocious onslaught. And all the while, he grinned like a snarling beast.

“I tried to take you completely by surprise, but the sword blocked my projectiles on its own! So I have no choice but to fight you head-on. And you know what that means, partner? I’ve won! Because you’ve never once beaten me at swordplay!”

The angel was right. Losing an arm was no handicap at all to someone like Rheinhardt. Leon had faced his fellow apprentice in battle 1,288 times and lost every single match. When the two were armed with swords, Leon had never even managed to land so much as a scratch.

And yet...

“You have no idea!” Leon yelled. “No idea what I’ve been up to these past four years!”

There had never been a moment where Leon hadn’t spared a thought for his partner. And the same went for Rheinhardt, too. But what had the angel been doing all this time?

Four years. It was hardly enough for all the training, experience, and accolades required to close the gulf of ability that separated the two. But Leon’s foe was not his old friend.

“I’ve done more than enough to catch up to you!”

Leon was still leagues behind his fellow apprentice. But the angel had stayed in the past. Stagnated. And there was no way Leon could possibly lose to someone like that.

“Haagh!”

Counter. Evade. Counter. Evade. Over and over and over again, his strikes landing nearer and nearer, until eventually, the impossible happened and Leon nicked his foe’s flesh.

“Rrgh?! No! How?”

The angel was stunned speechless. To him, taking a blow was unimaginable. But the truth was simple.

Leon knew his friend better than anyone else. He knew his ways of thinking, his vices, and his habits. Leon, meanwhile, had changed ever so slightly over the past four years, in ways that meant the angel may well have been fighting a complete stranger.

“I’ve been moving forward all this time! I’ve had no other choice! It was the only way to save you!”

As Leon gripped his sword, he thought back over the past four years. At their beginning, he was nothing more than a baggage handler. A useless burden. A pathetic excuse for an Adviser. But now he was different. He had walked the line of madness and sanity and come out the other end a changed man.

And the time was drawing near. The time for Leon Crossheart’s first victory... and also his last.

“Goddammiiiiiiiiit!”

Bit by bit, whatever elegance still remained in Rheinhardt’s strikes was slowly being chipped away.

Mate in six. Supposing he could remain focused and not screw up, Leon was guaranteed victory in just six more moves.

Five. He evaded the angel’s raging slash and swept the legs.

Four. His foe leaped back. The leg sweep missed. Leon closed in.

Three. He slammed the holy sword into his foe’s weapon, parrying the incoming blow.

Two. This was where his foe’s bad habit emerged. The shock stung the angel’s

wrist, causing him to angrily retaliate.

One. Leon caught his foe's blade on his own, and with a levering motion, flung it high into the air.

Now, with his foe utterly disarmed, the board was set. But just as Leon closed in for the kill, something happened he did not foresee.

"Rgh...?!"

His whole body began to sway.

"No...!"

Claire's will, within the sword, expressed its surprise.

Neither her nor the angel had expected it either.

For although it seemed that the holy sword had healed Leon's wounds entirely, that wasn't quite true. There were scars on his soul the magic couldn't heal.

Leon had called upon power far beyond his means. That had resulted in damage so great, even the holy sword could not fix it.

"So, fate has chosen me to be the victor!"

A wild smile spread across Rheinhardt's face as he thrust his bare hand like a spear.

It was too late. Leon could not hope to dodge the blow by himself, and Claire could not distract herself from making sure none of the angel's projectiles got through.

It was the end. The worst possible outcome.

However, as far as Leon was concerned, it was an outcome he should have predicted.

"I should have known. I'm cursed."

Leon had worked hard to achieve the same level of ability as his foe, but that was a trivial task compared to overturning the power of his own misfortune. That was why Leon had taken every precaution. This wasn't just him and Claire facing off against the angel; he had a second ally, perhaps his staunchest yet.

“M-Master!”

The angel, perhaps, had only seen her as a helpless child. Someone for him to threaten and for Leon to protect. But Alice Campbell was no such thing. She longed to stand up for her teacher, and that desire gave her unfathomable strength.

“Master!”

Alice lifted herself off the ground and, with strenuous effort, launched an arrow from her pure-white bow, surprising everyone...except for Leon.

“Excellently done, Alice,” he said.

The present fired at the past to save the future. The arrow unerringly struck the angel’s left shoulder.

“What?!”

The impact dulled the angel’s blow. Fate now rested in their hands. Leon and Alice. Master and disciple.

“It’s time to sever those chains that bind you, Master.”

“Time to face the future...together.”

The final step. Leon was about to finish the job Claire started four years ago. Without a moment’s hesitation, he drove the gilded tip of Calit Gelius through the angel’s black heart.

“Ghh...!”

Rheinhardt’s eyes went wide. Blood spilled from his lips. There were no last tricks up Rheinhardt’s sleeve this time.

Leon pulled the sword free, loosing a spray of crimson droplets into the air. Then he watched as the angel’s body began to liquefy and parted his lips in prayer for his partner’s soul.

“May your rest...”

But just then, he heard a weak voice.

“Part...ner...”

Alice jumped into action, fixing an arrow to her bow.

“Finish him off, quickly!” she screamed.



But Leon blocked her, “No, Alice,” he said. “Wait.” His crimson eyes still gazed at the angel at his feet, but what lay there was no longer a fiend consumed by darkness.

“...Surely not.”

As Rheinhardt lay on the brink of death, Leon saw just a flicker of the shining light his friend had once possessed.

And then Leon witnessed a miracle. Something he’d only thought possible in dream.

“You...never disappeared, did you? Your mind’s always been in there...!”

Leon gazed in wonder, and the angel lifted his face. The azure light drained from his eyes, until they became a burning crimson, the same color as Leon’s. The fiend had left him, and Leon’s brother had returned.

“Rheina!”

His whole body began to shake. Leon could only stand and stare. How long had he awaited this moment? How many times had he dreamed of finally atoning for his sin?

Leon didn’t know if he should be allowed this moment, but he didn’t care. He had to say it. That he had stood by and watched his friend die.

“R...Rheina! I... I’m...”

He had to hurry. His friend’s life could slip away at any moment. If Leon missed this chance, there would never be another.

And yet the words would not come. He was afraid. Afraid his heartfelt plea would be rejected. Leon silently cursed his own cowardice.

And so it was Leon’s fellow apprentice who broke the silence.

“...I really...messed things up, didn’t I?”

“No,” Leon replied. “You didn’t do anything wrong. It’s all my fault. Please—”

Please...what? Forgive me? thought Leon. Surely, it wasn’t that simple. How could he dare speak those words now?

But Rheinhardt saw the guilt eating away at his partner. “I’ve always been watching you,” he said with a bittersweet smile. “I was trapped, deep inside, but I could still see. I think...this is God’s way of giving us one last chance to make things right.”

Rheinhardt was ever softhearted. Always and forever. It would have been easy to leave his curses and frustrations with his troublesome younger peer. However, he rejected hate...and chose love instead.

“The fiend... It didn’t represent what I really thought. I never blamed you, partner, not once.”

Even as his body melted away, even as death drew near, Rheinhardt did not falter. A kind smile spread across his face as he said...

“Stand tall. You’re our family. Our pride.”

Within that one small utterance and the gentle look in his eyes was everything Leon needed to hear.

“I’m sorry!” he said. “I failed you! I swear, I’ll make it better. I swear, I’ll be a better man! So, please...”

Please.

Please, rest in peace.

“As long as you’re still here, partner, I have nothing to fear.”

He was disappearing. Rheinhardt’s time on this earth was running out. But he was determined to leave nothing but love-filled words in the mind of his earthbound brother.

“Listen, partner,” he said with his dying breath. “You don’t need to come here with me. Hell’s only big enough for one of us. You live. Live...and be happy. You got...that...part...ner...?”

Leon’s pride, his shining hope, died not as a fiend but as a paragon of humanity.

“...May your rest be eternal salvation.”

With a prayer, Leon picked up the Testament stone at his feet.

“Even if your body is no more, old friend...”

Rheinhardt’s soul would always walk alongside him. No matter what pits he walked through, Leon would never be alone.

“That’s right. We’re always watching over you, Leon. Rheina and me, too. So be strong, my successor.”

As Leon held the holy sword, it somehow seemed to lose its luster. After seeing things through to the end, the curse that bound Claire’s mind had finally been lifted, and another grand soul made its way up to heaven.

Leon cast an eye toward the clear blue sky. “Just leave it to me, Master,” he said. He felt that somewhere up there, she was smiling down on him.

“That’s the end, then, isn’t it, Master?”

“...No,” said Leon, shaking his head.

“It’s only the beginning.”

Bonds Reforged and a New Story Begins

With the angel's death, the temple knights were able to eradicate the fiends plaguing the Holy City, and a disaster fated to go down in history under Leon's name was averted. Instead, he was praised. The third Hero of Salvation, Leon Crossheart, vanquished the monstrous Rheinhardt who sought to destroy the capital.

The one who penned this tale was none other than Emilia Redheart herself.

"So you really did love Master after all!"

"Shut up, kid."

Leon turned his back on the quarreling duo and gazed at the memorial before him. Around his neck, he wore a crimson band adorned with a sky-blue stone—his partner's Testament Stone—forming a symbol of Leon's determination. It showed that his soul would always walk alongside them. And with those comforting thoughts, Leon addressed the two people whose names were etched into the cenotaph.

"Master. Rheina. Just watch. I'm going to save this world."

Leon had inherited a dream. A dream once shared by all three of them. A dream in which there was no Shroud, no fiends, in which the people smiled. The realization of that dream was the ghoul's new purpose.

"...You think there's room for me on that boat this time?" said Emilia, eyeing Leon with a prickly gaze as he turned around. "I'm done being treated as if this has nothing to do with me."

In the past, Claire had distanced herself from her little sister. Because of that, Leon and Rheinhardt had always treated her coldly as well. It wasn't because they didn't trust her; it was because they didn't want her to get hurt, but the

reasons made little difference.

“I don’t care what you say,” she said. “I’m coming anyway.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Leon replied. “Claire might not have wanted it...but I need you with me, Emilia.”

Leon’s frank words appeared to cheer Emilia up a little. She scoffed, and upon her lips was the faint hint of a smile.

“...Master. Say that to me as well.”

“Say what?”

“You know. The thing you just said to Emilia. Tell me like you told her.”

“...I need you with me, Alice.”

“Ooh-hoo!”

For some reason, Alice clutched her chest and fell to the floor. At first, Leon thought the girl must have had some kind of heart attack, but then she began giggling.

“Heh-heh! Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh!”

She seemed happy enough, so Leon opted to say nothing.

“Anyway,” said Emilia. “I’ve made my report, so what say we get on the road, huh?”

“Quite right,” Leon replied. “We need to figure out the details of our next plan.”

“But before that, shall we take lunch?” suggested Alice. “It’s almost noon.”

The three of them set off. Out on the street, the people’s watchful eyes were not so different from before. They saw not the hero who had saved their town but a terrifying creature to be shunned and feared.

For the first time in a long while, Leon found their attitude disagreeable. Not because of his own self-esteem, but because now Alice was being exposed to it as well.

“...Master? Is something the matter?” she asked.

“No, I just realized something. I can be a real selfish bastard sometimes.”

Alice didn't understand what Leon was trying to say. She cocked her head in confusion while Emilia snorted.

“Tell us something we don't know!” she laughed.

Leon's possessiveness was clear to his longtime friend, Emilia. And luckily for him, the feeling was mutual.

“Don't worry, you old ghoul. We aren't going to let you go either, are we, young lady?”

“Huh? Uh, oh! Yes! I mean, no! ...What are we talking about?”

“Hueh-hueh-hueh-hueh-hueh.”

Alice's innocent reaction evoked quite a strange noise from Leon. It was only Emilia who recognized what it was supposed to be.

“It's been a long time since we've heard a laugh out of you, Leon,” she said.

“...Huh? W-was that a laugh?!”

“Yeah. Gives you the chills, don't it?” Emilia teased.

“Um... I...I thought it was very pretty.”

“...Don't bother,” said Leon “You don't need to lie to me.” Then, in an apparent attempt to change the subject, he turned and looked her in the eye.

“You've impressed me,” he said. “You've said two things that both turned out to be true.”

“Have I?”

“Yes. First, you told me you would protect me, and you did. And secondly...”

Leon removed his iron mask, revealing his rotting, unmoving lips.

“You said you would make me smile. Well, just look at this.”

Leon placed his fingers into his mouth and tugged up the corners. It was a disturbing, revolting grin.

“...And I'm going to make sure you smile like that every day from now on!” Alice beamed, her face a radiant flower.

And thus, the curtain fell on the tale of the monster-eating fiend.
And opened on the tale of the third Hero of Salvation.

I had a dream.

A painful dream, but a happy one.

But like all dreams, it did not last forever.

I woke, and now...

"I dream again... There we go."

After watching the figures disappear into the distance, the man stilled his pen, his poem complete. As the blood in his notebook began to dry, he grinned.

"Ah, this tale has come out quite perfectly. Consider it my gift to you."

The man tore out the page and left it by the memorial stone.

And then.

That man.

That killer.

Night Walker...

...peered at the name on the stone.

"Rheinhardt Crossline. You were a great man indeed."

There was nothing in his voice but genuine admiration. Who but a true hero could possibly have defied his brainwashing at the very last moment?

"This was not meant to happen," he said. "It was all supposed to end when the two of you reunited in Regtelia Town."

But somehow Rheinhardt had managed to go against his master's will and allowed Leon to get away. If Night Walker's domination had been any weaker...

"...then I suspect you would have been able to become a Red-Eye on your own."

Leon seemed to be under the impression that the monstrous Rheinhardt had allowed his jealousy to control him, but that was not the truth. There wasn't a single jealous bone in that man's body. There was far more love by far than any negative emotion whatsoever.

"Men like that are hard to come by," the killer mused. "Thank you, Rheinhardt, for showing it to me. Now, how should I express my thanks? Oh, I know..."

A vicious smile emerged on Night Walker's face.

"I'll send your brother to you as soon as possible. Won't that be nice?"

He laughed and laughed and laughed. And then he turned his gaze from the stone toward Leon's back.

"The scene has already been set. Now we've come this far, there is no way out for you save despair."

Very soon now, the ghoul would meet the fate the script demanded. This time, his end would be far more literal and far more permanent.

He would lose all he held dear.

"Ahh, I just can't wait."

Night Walker spun giddily and began walking in the opposite direction. But under his breath, he muttered, as though speaking on behalf of an old friend...

"Death really does become you, Augus, my Lord."

[AFTERWORD]

Whenever I embark upon a new challenge, my heart is always half-excited, half-remorseful.

Myojin Katou here.

I recently made a choice that brought with it such new and exciting challenges.

I speak, of course, of body-weight exercise.

In terms of building muscle, this form of exercise is inferior to weight lifting. However, as soon as I felt what it was like to push my own limits, I had a complete change of heart on the matter.

With weight lifting, of course, there is the excitement that comes with slowly racking up heavier and heavier weights, but with body-weight exercise, there is a completely different, and in my opinion, far superior elation of accomplishing feats that one was previously incapable of.

I started from being unable to do a single push-up, then with nothing more than perseverance I was soon able to do ten, then twenty. Each accomplishment brought with it new challenges in the form of more difficult exercises, and I quickly found myself understanding the appeal. Recently, I succeeded at pulling off one of the most difficult forms, the full planche push-up. It is sometimes known as the zero-g push-up, and I could see why, as I truly felt as though I were floating in the air while performing it.

But, not one to rest on my laurels, I immediately set my sights on the straight-arm handstand push-up. It is pretty much as the name suggests: a push-up

performed from a handstand position. This posed a far greater challenge, and it took many falls before I could even hold the handstand for more than a few seconds. I often injured my elbows and knees, swearing never to try again as I collapsed to the ground. But once the pain subsided, I found myself drawn to giving it another try, even though I fared no better on subsequent attempts.

I think the protagonist of this story was much the same way.

Failing, collapsing, but never able to give up completely. Perhaps we could all learn something from him.

Finally, I would like to express my thanks.

To Kasu Komeshiro, who provided the wonderful illustrations found in this volume.

To my editor, who has infinite patience.

To everyone involved with bringing this work to fruition.

And, of course, my unending gratitude for those dear readers who elected to pick up this book.

As this is a new work, I am not sure whether I can say with any confidence, “See you next time...”

But at the very least, I shall pick up my pen once more and pray that it be so.

—Myojin Katou

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